MARGARET YORKE

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

https://archive.org/details/margaretyorke0000kath_l3v3

MARGARET YORKE

BOOKS BY

KATHLEEN NORRIS

MARGARET YORKE
PASSION FLOWER
RED SILENCE
STORM HOUSE
THE FOOLISH VIRGIN
WHAT PRICE PEACE?
BEAUTY AND THE BEAST
THE FUN OF BEING A MOTHER
MY BEST GIRL
BARBERRY BUSH
THE SEA GULL
HILDEGARDE
THE BLACK FLEMINGS
LITTLE SHIPS
NOON
ROSE OF THE WORLD
THE CALLAHANS AND THE MURPHYS
BUTTERFLY
CERTAIN PEOPLE OF IMPORTANCE
LUCRETIA LOMBARD
THE BELOVED WOMAN
HARRIET AND THE PIPER
SISTERS
JOSSELYN'S WIFE
UNDERTOW
MARTIE, THE UNCONQUERED
THE HEART OF RACHAEL
THE STORY OF JULIA PAGE
THE TREASURE
SATURDAY'S CHILD
POOR, DEAR MARGARET KIRBY
THE RICH MRS. BURGOYNE
MOTHER

MARGARET YORKE

BY

KATHLEEN NORRIS

Author of RED SILENCE, *Etc.*

DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.

GARDEN CITY 1930 NEW YORK

PRINTED AT THE *Country Life Press*, GARDEN CITY, N. Y., U. S. A.

COPYRIGHT, 1923, 1930
BY KATHLEEN NORRIS
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

MARGARET YORKE

CHAPTER I

"WERE you going up to the house again, Miss Yorke?"

"I *can* go, Mrs. Cutting!"

And Margaret Yorke, half closing the book she had been reading aloud, looked eagerly at her employer, every fibre of her body tense with willingness to serve.

"Oh, no—no—no!" Mrs. Cutting leaned back and shut her eyes. "I was just wondering—you spoke about the new *Atlantic*," she said.

"I have it here!" Margaret had long ago learned to anticipate these languid suggestions.

"Presently!" said Mrs. Cutting faintly, closing her eyes again.

Silence fell in the garden; silence, that is, as much as any brimming garden ever knows in a western April. Margaret, closing "The Law and the Word," laid the book and the magazine silently on the grass, and leaned back in her own chair, glad to rest, and listen to the thousand voices that began to fill the pause.

The chairs, luxurious deep basket chairs, were placed upon a big Persian rug, in the mellow shadow of great oaks. Below them the lawn sloped down, a stretch of flawless emerald, toward the unseen highway, and the roofs of Hillsborough, beyond, and all about the lawn were the shrubs and trees of the famous old garden. The architectural claims of the house, a wooden monstrosity of bay-windows and balustraded porches, had been eclipsed long ago by the Italian and Spanish and colonial mansions that were beginning now to make

the Peninsula beautiful, but the Cutting garden was one of the loveliest in all California.

Margaret Yorke, who was eastern born, never ceased to marvel at the prodigality of it. The long dry western summer was one blaze of color, the fresh western air was eternally scented with exquisite odors.

Mid-April—why, that was only the beginning of spring in Connecticut, or down on Long Island. Sometimes there was actual snow there in mid-April, and at best the willows would be only showing their timid withes of green, and the elms and maples be dotted with crimson and green against bare boughs.

But here, the fruit-blossoms were gone, the acacia was turning brown, and the bridal-wreath and pansies and cherokee roses were in the full flood of their perfumed bloom. A million buds were bursting everywhere; the climbing yellow and white banksia roses were dotted thick with them, the lilacs were already showing dark purple tips, there were border pinks, walls of sweet-pea blossoms, and the sturdy blazing marigolds were ready to burst along the prim brick walks.

The afternoon was still, not a leaf stirred. Sunshine and shadow lay over the garden in motionless pools of color and darker color, green and darker green. Birds were splashing in the marble basin at the foot of the lawn, and Margaret, drowsy in the stillness, and in the scented warmth and shaded brilliance, heard a screen door close lightly, in the direction of the house, heard water slishing briskly still further away, where the new garage and the old barns were, heard the occasional mellow honk of a motor car, sweeping along the polished highway that ran without interruption from San Francisco, a dozen miles north, to Los Angeles, more than four hundred due south.

"Jim?" said Mrs. Cutting, suddenly, opening her eyes.

"Right beyond that clump of snow-balls," Margaret supplied. "He and Nora are building a village." And, seeing that

the anxious look in the other's eyes did not abate, she called: "*Jim*—mee!"

Immediately a rustling took place in the rich foliage of the snow-balls; the round, green-white blooms shook agitatedly. A rosy, squarely-built boy of four, with his head a tawny mop of thick hair, and his small body encased in a brief garment of blue-and-white, appeared, and beamed at Margaret, who was his special chum and favorite.

"W—o—t?" he called back boldly.

"Nothing, darling. Go on playing!" Mrs. Cutting called. "Mummy just wanted to see that you were all right, that was all."

The snow-balls quivered again, the boy was gone. Mrs. Cutting smiled.

"He has a nervous Mummy," she admitted. And again she leaned back and shut her eyes.

A pleasant place in which to find oneself, mused Margaret, basking in the restored peace. Her mind moved ahead contentedly; she had not been for three years a resident of this most ordered and established of homes, without knowing exactly what to expect between her eight-o'clock breakfast with Jim in the sun-parlor, to the time when she parted with Mrs. Cutting at night.

The afternoon would ripen and decline softly, the shadow and shine moving slowly over the grass. And in a little while Rudolph, extremely correct in his whip-cord, and followed by the equally correct Molly, would come across the rose-garden, and down the brick steps, and along the walk.

Would Mrs. Cutting drive this afternoon?

"I believe I will!" Mrs. Cutting always said, with an air of intense surprise. Consultation with Margaret followed; why need they change? Why not go as they were? "I see no reason why we should not simply get our wraps," Mrs. Cutting always said.

Then another problem. Should they take Jim?

They usually decided to take Jim. But Nora might brush his hair, and put on his white coat and cap. Jim, entirely delicious in these garments, would be waiting in the car for them when they came down, a few minutes later.

The drive usually took them through beautiful San Mateo, Burlingame, sometimes Menlo Park or Stanford. If they were to make a call, or stop at the club for tea, then Nora would go, to watch Jim. In any case they always had a peaceful, dreamy, restful excursion, and came back to the house at about six, when Jim was whisked off for bath, supper and bed.

Mrs. Cutting then must lie down, but Margaret liked to go up to the nursery for the final events of Jim's well-regulated little day. Margaret idolized the little boy, as indeed all the household did, and she was as anxious as Mrs. Cutting to be sure that all went well with him. There had been four little Cuttings before Jim, four delicate and ill-fated little Cuttings who, all too young, had taken the same path, the path that ended among the white stones upon the Coma hills. Jim was the last.

"The last of the Cuttings!" Mrs. Cutting sometimes called him. Margaret had been with her several months before she was told, and then by a casual woman at the Country Club, that this radiant child had been adopted, was not a true Cutting, after all.

Margaret never made any allusion to it; she could well believe that it gave her employer satisfaction to maintain the little pretense. And with all her restless, hungry heart she longed to please gentle, pathetic, faded Mrs. Cutting.

"Everybody has been always trying to please her, and keep her in cotton wool, and she never has done a thing for it, except be born a Crittenden, and marry a Cutting!" Margaret would fume, in her angry moods. But in more reasonable moments she almost loved this pale-cheeked, pale-haired, weary-voiced aristocrat, so sure of herself, of her posi-

tion, so established in bank and church and society, who could yet be so gentle, so considerate, and so grateful. Margaret had been with her now for three years, and the older woman depended upon her, indeed, loved her. And Margaret in return was grateful for her quiet friendship and for the protection of the ugly, aristocratic wooden house under its eucalyptus and willow trees.

Her gratitude and affection, however, did not extend itself to Mrs. Cutting's nephew and closest relative, Stanley Crittenden, who was like a son in the house, and who would some day inherit most of the estate. Jim would have a generous portion, should his adopted mother die in his minority, but Stan, the popular and beloved, would come in for all the Crittenden money, and the big ranch in the Santa Cruz mountains.

Margaret, considering Stan and his claims, would say to herself impatiently that it was nothing to her! He was handsome, he was clever and popular and decent—very well, let him be all this and more, and let him some day marry one of the girls who were so crazy about him, and build the adobe house he was always planning for the ranch!

But please—please don't ask her to be so eternally enthusiastic about him, because he bored her to death!

Thus Margaret, in the airy privacy and silence of her room, or over her book in the garden, or wandering about the ranch with Jim's little warm hand in hers.

But when Mrs. Cutting spoke of her nephew, Margaret was naturally all civil appreciation. She looked at pictures of Stan, "a horrible little prig," she commented mentally upon his dancing school velvets, and "one of those imbecile drippy-mouthed babies!" she thought, of a picture of eight-months-old Stan, in a shell. She thought him affectedly rough and untidy in his football suit—in fact, she did not like him at all, in any guise.

So that it was hard to have his aunt eternally praising him,

eternally inviting responsive praise. Margaret had to arrange dinner parties to suit Stan's preferences, she had to accompany her employer to Del Monte to see Stan play polo, and to Pebble Beach to see Stan play golf. Margaret remained passively polite, when these festivities were in progress. Other young women, smartly stockinged, in sleeveless white silk, with richly-scalloped hair, would crowd about him, full of gay familiarities, praise and affection; Margaret despised them. And when, after dinner, they reappeared freshly brushed and powdered, in irresistible little flowered chiffon frocks, Margaret would eye them darkly for a few moments, eye them until Stan appeared, always handsomest and most at ease in his irreproachable evening dress, and then, before the first little adorer had surrendered her curls, slippers, bare arms and draperies into his arms, Margaret would retire, with a book, assuring herself that they were a silly lot—trying to believe that all this waste of time and money amused them!

The position of Stanley Crittenden was that of any well-born, handsome, amiable young man who finds himself still single, with a large income, three or four congenial clubs, and more than comfortable prospects, at thirty-two. He was vice-president of the family lumber business in San Francisco, he worked honestly, and played with even more enthusiasm, and he would have been dull indeed not to realize that he was a universal favorite.

His was one of those fortunate natures that give small ground to envy and dislike. He really was the charming, friendly, witty, unspoiled man he seemed to be. Visiting ladies, at the polo, golf or tennis matches, immediately picked him out.

"No, the tall sunburned one. The one who came into the club today with that English polo man. Yes, that one, in the cream-colored sweater. Crittenden. And is he married?"

The visiting ladies would meet him; his world was filled

with fair-haired girls who smiled at him, and rosy brunettes who talked sports. A famous actress made him conspicuous for the three weeks of her San Francisco stay; a New York society leader was said to be mad about him. He smiled upon, he flirted easily with them all. His face was usually burned a deep bronze, his teeth were white against it when he smiled, his light brown, straight hair would be in disorder from the violence of his playing, he would twist a racket or weigh a club with delightful boyish awkwardness.

Margaret, watching him disdainfully, had long before this decided that he never lost the effect of a single ingenuous smile, of a single backward toss of the tumbled mane.

Stan lived with his aunt, in Burlingame, theoretically. Actually he spent much time with his friends, at his San Francisco club, or wherever inclination took him. At least one night a week found him at "Uplands," the famous dairy farm in the Santa Cruz mountains; it had belonged to his grandfather, old Ross Crittenden, once; it had been a rich man's delight and toy. Since her husband's death, Mrs. Cutting had made the farm her summer residence; but Stan managed it now, entertained his friends there; her partial claim upon it had long ago been ceded to him, as a gift from his aunt. She went there as his guest.

This was perhaps the hardest thing for Margaret to accept. She truly loved the big farm, where she and Jim and Mrs. Cutting spent their holidays all year long. And it was hard to think that Stan, with all his other good fortune, was master here. Margaret, liking perhaps to think herself a little his superior, would have been glad to have him scorn the shabby wooden ranch-house, the homely simplicity that reigned at "Uplands." It was somehow oddly disconcerting to realize that this "pampered poodle," as she sometimes called him, was really at his happiest and best when he was there.

Mrs. Cutting had introduced the young people hopefully. She could talk to Margaret about anything, everything, all

day long, and she hoped to find in Stan a congenial subject. But from the instant of their meeting both Stan and Miss Yorke had shown something almost like hostility. The girl fenced with him, was always nettled and unnatural in his presence, and Stan, who was accustomed to kindness and friendliness, was antagonized by finding a woman who did not like him. Darn it, he thought, let her think what she pleased! But one would think she might be civil.

"I don't get her," he assured his aunt. Mrs. Cutting was, upon second thoughts, not sorry. The girl was extremely handsome, after all, and armed neutrality was possibly the safest relationship for the pair.

"She has been a wonderful solution for me," she protested mildly. "I don't know what I should have done without her!"

"What's her history?" Stan had once asked. His aunt, reviewing readily all that she knew, had to admit that it was not much, after all. She—Mrs. Cutting—had despaired, three years ago, of finding the right woman to help her, with letters, with bills, with social responsibilities, and with the recently-adopted Jim. And this girl, delicate after a severe sickness, had turned up in California with unexceptionable letters from Trowbridge, the old family lawyer in New York.

"Trowbridge couldn't have spoken more highly of anyone, Stan; he even said that he would reimburse the girl for her trip here, if she could not place herself properly. And I was just beginning to have my terrible headaches—Jim was really too much for me. You can see that she's a gentlewoman, she's absolutely reserved, never talks of herself; in all these years she's been simply wonderful! And it gives me a sort of pleasure to respect her and show her that I do," said Mrs. Cutting, more than once, "and to do everything I can to make her position comfortable and happy here."

"She adores you, Aunt Hat, and no wonder!" Stanley would tell her. His aunt always flushed complacently; she

was sensitive to praise. "But oh, what she doesn't think about me!" Stan added, one day. "A skin that you would love to touch—with a bat. I noticed her yesterday, she was with Jim at the club. You'd sent Foote over with my clothes, you know. 'Foote, there is Mr. Crittenden!' she said.—Gosh, I can't give the tone! She might as well have added, 'It's a quarter of a mile's walk home, but he prefers to change here, and keep you patiently waiting, while your dinner gets cold!'"

"Foote always loves to do anything for you, dear," Mrs. Cutting answered, in mild surprise. "And he dines very late, anyway, so that I'm *sure* you were mistaken!"

Margaret Yorke was a tall, slender, dark girl, with an alert brightness of aspect that belied her habitual reserve and silence. Her skin was a soft, even olive, flushing into exquisite apricot on her high cheek-bones, and her cloud of black, silky hair framed her thin, intelligent face like smoke. There was an exquisite tawny pallor about her coloring, a sort of Spanish warmth and glow. Her eyes were a dark Irish blue, set in black, upcurling long lashes, and surrounded by what the Irish themselves call the touch of sooty fingers. The fine, straight black brows almost met beneath her low, wide forehead, and her mouth was wide, thin-lipped, scarlet, and strangely disciplined for the mouth of a girl her age. Her hands were brown, thin, nervous and virile, and she used them beautifully.

Stanley, a judge of beauty, had said to himself when he first noticed her that she had none. But he had admired the slenderness, the rich color and the quick, nervous grace of her body, and of late her cryptic smile, and her mysterious, quite unembarrassed silences had begun to hold an odd charm for him, too. He said to himself that if she was haughty she was a darned nice girl, too, always sweet with his aunt and the kid; looking as fresh and crisp and well-groomed every morn-

ing at breakfast as most women did at the beginning of a dance.

There had been an August day at the ranch when he had particularly noticed her. She and the child had been discovered swimming, by Stanley and a group of friends he had unexpectedly brought down. He had seen, that day, that the soft, warm, gipsy brown of her coloring extended all over her body, and that her arms and legs were beautifully made, slim and straight, like a boy's. He had liked the look, half-proud and half-confused, with which she had passed them, leading the child, and had remembered for some days the challenging glance of those blue eyes, under the drying, dripping mop of black hair.

And then there had been another day, too, when he had been in his aunt's room, in the Burlingame house, and Margaret had come in, furred and with her cheeks rosy from winter air, and with violets at her breast. She had looked pretty —more than merely pretty, she had looked startlingly handsome, that day.

Since then he had conceded her beauty. But he told himself that he did not like the girl—too damn secretive and superior. And they regarded each other with a thinly-veiled hostility and a reluctant respect.

On this particular April evening, at seven o'clock, Stan and Margaret met by chance, just before dinner. The handsomest homes of the summer colony, with the Cutting home in their very centre, were set in a nest of hills: hills sparsely wooded with magnificent sprawling oaks. Upon these hills the stone and brick fences made a network; the Castlemans' garden looked over the Bristols' side-wall, the Bishops and Popes and Priests had for fifty friendly years used the same curving driveway.

Below the Cutting rose garden was the sunken garden, with the long pool and the dial, and beyond that, dappled with shade and sun all day, and bathed now in clear, shadowless

twilight, lay the back of the Hendersons' magnificent Italian garden, and a wedge-shaped slice of the Cornwells' lawn. Besides the oaks there were hundreds of other trees now, planted trees; there were the thin yellow-green screening of poplars and the feathery plumes of willow and pepper and eucalyptus, and there were laurels and oranges, and pyramids of roses almost as large.

Margaret, after the bed-time riot with Jim, had dressed, and had come out to the terrace for a breath of quiet and solitude after the day. She missed solitude more than any other thing, in this oddly constrained life; it was with a sense of incredible relief that she heard, at rare intervals, her employer's decision to attend a dinner, or to spend a day in town without the escort of Miss Yorke.

She saw Stan long before he saw her; saw him crossing the Tubbses' tennis-court and opening the latticed gate into his aunt's shrubberies. The tall figure, in its flannels, with the cap pushed off his forehead as a concession to the untimely heat of the day, moved comfortably yet steadily between the low twisted and gnarled limbs of the great oaks.

He came up the brick steps, and smiled when he saw the dark-haired girl, a shadow among shadows, on the upper terrace.

With almost any other woman of his acquaintance Stan would have found a dozen cheerful, casual things to say. He was incorrigibly friendly, and was considered something of a wit. But Margaret's mere presence made him feel faintly antagonistic and uncomfortable, and he heard himself saying forcedly:

"Well! My aunt isn't down yet?"

"I don't know," Margaret answered so briefly and coldly that Stan immediately realized that his innocent query might be construed into a suggestion that if Aunt Hat *were* downstairs Miss Yorke must necessarily be in attendance upon her.

To obliterate this unfortunate impression he loitered beside her at the brick wall above the lower terrace.

"Peachy, isn't it?" he asked, of the garden in the soft dusk.

She gave him a quiet side glance, and for one uneasy minute he thought she was not going to answer him, except with that dispassionate look. But then she said:

"It *is* beautiful. The nicest hour of the day, I think."

"I do, too!" Stan said enthusiastically. He wanted her to say one thing more, to prove to his satisfaction that Miss Yorke could not snub him into silence with her airs, and then he would rush in and dress. But to his annoyance she was placidly still.

"You've—you've lived most of your life in the country?" Stan hazarded.

Again there was that disquieting silence. The dark eyes moved thoughtfully to his face. Margaret said simply:

"Oh, no. No, most of my childhood was spent in New York City; my father died when I was quite small, and Mother—Mother and I lived there."

Something wistful, something almost shaken, in the tone with which her voice lingered upon the repeated word, stirred Stan. He realized that in the three years that he had known her casually, an efficient shadow in his aunt's house, and in these few last months when they had seemed to be drawn together by their very unlikeness, they had never been so close.

"You've lost your mother, Miss Yorke?"

"Eight years ago."

This answer came readily and simply. She was not looking at him now; he could only see the clean-cut line of her cheek, vanishing against the smoky sweep of dark hair. But he could see her hands, the thin, nervous wrists disappearing in the prim, embroidered cuffs that were silhouetted against her dark gown. These hands, long-fingered, and beautifully

shaped, resting upon the top of the old wall, glimmered pearly in the dusk.

"You and she were alone?" Stan ventured.

Margaret was silent for a long space. But he did not feel hostility now. He knew that she was remembering—gathering words.

"I had to begin living again, just as I would if you picked me up now, and put me down in the centre of a Zulu village," she said slowly. "There was not a book—not a friend—not a moment's work or pleasure, upon which we were not united. We planned—we worked—we breakfasted and lunched and dined together, we shared one room. She was a woman who put joy into everything—Mother. And when she went—when she went——

"She had gone to a hospital," Margaret went on, as if she were thinking aloud; "she had had a heavy cold. The doctor thought that was all—at first. And—this Sunday afternoon, they began suddenly to be so gentle—oh, you don't know what that is! You don't know what that is!

"It was an April night—like this one, balmy and soft. And the street below the hospital window—I remember thinking that some day I would tell her how I had watched that street when she was sickest! I turned back to the chart—I'd hung over that chart, of course, and I remember the nurse saying—so gently: 'I don't believe I'd read that, Miss Yorke!'

"I went over . . . and knelt down beside the bed. . . ."

The faltering voice stopped. Stan saw the brown thin hands wrung in a passionate clasp. There was utter silence on the terrace. The fragrant gloom about them deepened, and far down below, among the spreading oaks, where a gap in the low hills gave upon eastern upland meadows, there was the first milky filtering of early moonlight.

"Well," said Margaret after awhile, in a voice cleared by the storm, "we must go in."

They turned, in the gloom, without another word, without

any comment from Stan. But when they reached the dark bushes and the impenetrable blackness of the curving, vine-swathed steps that led up to the porch, the man suddenly felt his hand grasped firmly by those nervous fingers. She needed his guidance in the dark.

Inexplicably thrilled, he tightened his big hard hand over hers. It was for but a moment; in a few seconds they were crossing the old-fashioned, wooden-balustraded piazza, and blinking in the yellow warm lights of the sitting-room.

CHAPTER II

MRS. CUTTING looked up placidly from her basket chair as they came in.

"Miss Yorke, would you—oh, there you are, Stan!"

She received his kiss on her forehead, under the sculptured ripple of her greying hair. "I was going to ask you to telephone Mr. Crittenden, Miss Yorke," she said carefully. "But now that he is here, we are spared that trouble. We needn't telephone now. I wasn't sure that you would be here, dear, so I thought I would just have Miss Yorke telephone—however, here you are, and we needn't telephone now."

Stanley had departed, early in this speech, to change and brush, and Margaret, quite composed, was conferring with a maid. Mrs. Cutting went on with her monologue, undisturbed. Mr. Crittenden was dining here—yes. And please ask Foote for the card-table, in the library. There were new cards on Miss Yorke's desk.

"The Wylies are coming over for coffee," observed Mrs. Cutting anxiously. "How can we play? That's five—you see Stan's one, I'm two, the Wylies, four, and you——"

"Don't count me!" Margaret said, hastily. But she knew it would be of no avail; her hostess preferred her to any other partner.

"Stan—we can't drop him," murmured his aunt. "He loves his game—he doesn't play very well, but he does so like it!"

"He loves to play with you, Mrs. Cutting. And since Mrs.

Wylie really doesn't play extremely well, that balances it," Margaret argued.

But the fact that the rich and self-confident Mrs. Wylie believed herself to play contract bridge superbly was one reason why Mrs. Cutting so liked to defeat her. Stan's aunt had a mental vision of Margaret's definite, clever pencil scoring triumphs: two down, doubled and vulnerable, and two hundred for the extra trick, was eight hundred, right?

Now, to Margaret's suggestion Mrs. Cutting merely said abstractedly, "No, I don't think that would do!" a phrase that Margaret often heard from her, and that meant simply that Mrs. Cutting wouldn't allow it—whatever it was—to "do," and that some other arrangement must be made.

"Suppose I telephone the Lakes," Margaret suggested. "His aunt plays, and we might have two tables: you and I against Mrs. Wylie and Judge Lake, and Miss Potter and Mr. Wylie with Mrs. Lake and Mr. Crittenden."

Mrs. Cutting's serious soft heavy face brightened slowly, from the utter bewilderment the quick names caused her, to satisfaction. She hated to think, and Margaret had straightened the whole thing out in one tenth of the time it would have taken her to do it. When the Wylies came in, after dinner, Margaret repaired to the telephone in the entrance hall and guardedly called the Lakes.

Mr. Lake and his aunt would be delighted to come; but Mrs. Lake was tired after a day in town.

"Try Manny Bishop, at the club," suggested Stan, who was perched upon the stairs with a cigarette, seriously watching the girl at the telephone.

Mr. Bishop was not at the club. Stanley negligently suggested Lee Calvin, his wife was in New York.

Margaret was ashamed of herself to find that this man, with his cigarette, and his sleek head, and sleek black coat, was vaguely angering her again. Why didn't he telephone himself, instead of letting her do it? She constrained herself

to be patient. After all, life had been too easy for him, and he was spoiled. He stretched himself comfortably on the stairs, in the softly-shaded light of the big square hallway, and watched her doing the work.

Lee Galvin would be delighted; be there in five minutes. Margaret went quietly into the library; there must be another table, and there must be trays of food and drink at about eleven. She took the precaution of running up to the big airy nursery before the game began; Nora and one or two of the other maids were in the day-nursery, looking at moving-picture magazines. Jimmy was luxuriously sprawled under the light silk comforter; his soft little neck was satisfactorily damp to her exploring fingers. His monkeys, his big bear, his seal and his clown were ranged neatly in kindergarten chairs. The train on its elaborately curved tracks was still.

Nora was reliability itself, if she was a dull old creature, thought Margaret, nodding a good-night to the maids. Nora and Mrs. Cutting had surrounded the child with every imaginable protection. But little boys had smothered or burned or frozen in their beds, and it was just as well to be *sure*. . . .

Tonight Stan found himself watching his aunt's companion with interest. He had always respected and perhaps also a little feared her, before this, as a person who, while not particularly congenial to himself, was nevertheless entirely satisfactory in her own sphere. His aunt loved and trusted her, and she had never failed the older woman. The servants behaved themselves better under Miss Yorke's management than they had ever been known to behave before. And with little Jim the girl was charming; she was passionately devoted to the child; she always seemed younger, and happier, and more human somehow when the little boy was playing with her, sprawled quietly in her lap, or trotting beside her through the gardens.

Stanley had been in Europe when she had first come to act as his aunt's companion. He had come back to find her

quietly installed in the old-fashioned house, efficient enough, liked by everybody, praised by all the women at the club, already "Margaret" to half of them, but somehow never giving very much of herself, always stand-offish and proud. Not that it was surprising, poor kid—she was only twenty-three, and she had evidently had some rough going, in one way and another. She seemed older than twenty-three.

Anyway, the impulsive touch of her smooth brown fingers on his, in the darkness of the terrace tonight, had given him a moment of real pleasure, and the memory of it remained with him. He found himself watching her, hearing her, rather liking her neighborhood, for the first time.

When she presently played a certain exciting hand, and he chanced to be dummy, he went to stand behind her. Mrs. Cutting, also dummy, sat back in placid security; Margaret had the bid, five spades doubled, and she had meant five spades.

"I only raised you once, partner," Mrs. Cutting said, laying down her hand.

"You did exactly right, partner," Margaret answered abstractedly, her eyes moving rapidly from her own cards to the resources of the dummy, and a contented light filling her eyes.

Mrs. Wylie was annoyed. The fact that she could not spend her money, and that she idled about all morning waiting for the afternoon and evening and the inevitable game of bridge, did not make her any the more willing to scribble checks when the game was over. It was the more annoying because this companion of Hattie Cutting's never gambled, herself; probably could not afford it. It wouldn't have been suitable, anyway. So that Hattie reaped double her normal profits.

Departing, at twenty minutes past one, Mrs. Wylie had a parting word for Miss Yorke.

Stanley happened to be a witness of this little by-play; he watched Margaret with amusement, even with a little admiration. Mrs. Wylie seemed the floundering, stupid, snob-

bish woman she was, he thought; Miss Yorke was as usual quite composed.

He followed Margaret into the library, when the older women had gone upstairs for wraps. Stanley balanced himself idly upon a table while the girl opened the French windows, extinguished lights, and, always with her grave and absent look, generally put the room to rights.

"Here, why don't you let me do that?" he protested suddenly, as she knelt before the dying wood fire, to shake ash-receivers into the pink glow. "Isn't—" he added—"isn't Foote—somebody—supposed to do this tomorrow?"

"Yes, but cigars smell all night long," Margaret answered definitely. "Don't bother about the tables—they don't smell," she added, with a faint little gleam of friendliness in recognition of his help.

"What was that old girl trying to get over, in the hall? I didn't get it," said Stan encouraged.

"Mrs. Wylie?" And now Margaret did smile outright. "Oh, that was a little personal complication," she said.

"No, but what was it? I could see that she was fussed," pursued Stan.

"You know her daughter Jane Wylie," Margaret explained lightly and cautiously, with a glance toward the hall. "Jane impulsively asked me to be on the Tableaux Committee for the Strawberry Fête. Evidently Mama did not approve!"

"Oh, that was why she kept stammering that the lists were not made up, nothing was decided!" Stan said, enlightened.

"Exactly," Margaret said, with a little amused twitch at her lips, but unsmiling eyes.

"I like the gall!" Stan commented mildly. "She didn't have the nerve to get away with that!"

Margaret shrugged faintly, extinguished the last lamp, and went out of the dark room into the hall again. Following her, Stanley saw the hall lights ring her dark head with an instant's aureole.

"I was sorry for her," she said to him then, simply, as the others came downstairs.

The calm of it, the poise of it, were so strange, in conjunction with her glowing youth, and some friendly, confiding quality—new in her tonight—was so bewildering him that Stanley felt a delightful thrill of boyish excitement as he said:

"How old are you—a hundred?"

And instantly he felt that the personal note chilled her; her eyes dilated, her lips thinned, and she made no answer.

A moment later he had opened the wide front door for the departing card players. Beyond was the dark, breezy spring night, motor cars were moving slowly, like fire-eyed monsters, on the crunching gravel of the drive. The light threw a theatrical green upon the shrubbery.

Margaret shut the door, when the guests were gone; Mrs. Cutting had disappeared. The girl gave Stanley a questioning glance, as if to ask, "You don't need these lights?" and put her firm thumb upon the switch that lighted the upper, and darkened the lower, hall. And immediately, with a little nod for good-night, she was staidly mounting the stairs.

She had done that before, given him that questioning grave look and so gone up to her room. She had done it exactly so a score of times. But tonight Stanley felt a certain challenge in her mere presence, felt a little excited about her. He leaped three or four steps after her and said, impulsively:

"Oh, Miss Yorke!"

"Yes?" she asked, surprised, turning, halfway up the stairs.

Her beautiful full soft breast was a creamy brown like her slender arms and nervous hands.

"There was something I wanted to ask you about," Stanley said, having nothing whatever in mind, but thinking fast.

"Well?" she encouraged him.

Stanley sat down on the wide stairs, and as to stand above him would have been to remove herself ridiculously from his vision and neighborhood, she settled, after a second's hesitation, beside him. Her black taffeta skirts settled, too, with a delicate rustle.

"What I wanted to ask you," Stanley said, with inspiration, "was if you think my aunt really cares whether or not I go up to the Hutchinsons on the Rogue River, next week."

"Oh?" she breathed, with a cautious glance upward toward Mrs. Cutting's rooms, above. "No," Margaret said, reflecting. "I don't think she does. Except," she added politely, "that she always hates to have you go away."

"Then I think I'll go," Stan decided, knowing all the time that nothing would persuade him to go.

Margaret, making no comment on this, arose and turned to ascend the stairs.

"My aunt's a darling, isn't she?" Stanley contributed hopefully.

"I think so," Margaret said, over her shoulder, after a second's hesitation.

She went away, without even a good-night.

She would have breakfast with Jim at eight o'clock, he knew, she always did. The two would come in from the garden, laughing, fresh, hungry, as the clock was striking. He could breakfast with them tomorrow, very easily.

"She's extremely attractive!" he thought, remembering her oddly reluctant voice, and the neither small nor pretty, yet strangely fascinating mouth.

"Margaret—huh?" he mused, standing still in the middle of the room. "Margaret."

Mrs. Cutting had preceded them upstairs; without a good-night to Stan, which rather surprised him. Margaret did not have a good-night either, but that was not uncommon, and the girl went to her room and undressed with only

the usual regret for what was, after all, a wasted evening, and a yawning sort of wonderment as to what would have been really a wiser way to spend it.

Brushing up French verbs, or reading history? Ah, well, thought Margaret, weary and dispirited, as she busily braided her hair and splashed her face with bracing cold water after the warm soapsuds—ah, well, there had been years when she had been busy and conscientious and ambitious! But her heart recoiled from their memory. All wasted, all wasted!

She remembered herself, a talkative twelve, going through the Metropolitan Museum with her mother, note-book in hand.

"I'm going to make lists of what's really *good*, Momsie, and you tell me! And then when I'm older I'll be really a cultivated young lady. . . ."

She remembered dressing, upon airless, burning summer mornings, when the city outside their microscopic apartment was one brassy glare of heat.

"Momsie, I'm going to take one French verb every morning, while I'm lacing my shoes! Don't you think that's a good idea? . . ."

All wasted. Momsie had been dead many years, and there had been no one since to talk to, to plan with, to practise little generosities upon!

The unexpected talk upon the upper terrace this afternoon had oddly stirred her. It had been good to speak of her mother again!

"No one is like you, Mother," Margaret said, standing in her thin night-gown at the window and looking down upon the dark garden. "Ah, wouldn't I like to go into Childs again with you, on a cold winter afternoon, and have cocoa and graham toast, and have you take out your little stubby pencil and begin to figure on rents and laundry and meals! My dearest——"

A step behind her on the heavy carpet made her start;

Mrs. Cutting had come in, an almost unprecedented event.

"Oh, Miss Yorke, you poor child you, it's two o'clock, and you ought to be getting your sleep! But I am so distressed . . ."

She sat down, an insignificant figure, with her muffling big dressing-gown on, and her thin hair in a sleek tail.

"I'm so sorry!" Margaret reached for her own wrapper and sat down herself, expectant and sympathetic, on the foot of her bed.

"Mr. Wylie told me something tonight—oh, I shall be *so* distressed if it is true!" pursued Mrs. Cutting, automatically pushing a rocker toward Margaret. She hated people to sit on beds.

"I don't know what possesses girls, nowadays!" she lamented, as Margaret changed her seat. "I think Mrs. Ferguson is *crazy*, to rent her house, anyway!" she burst out resentfully. "What on earth does she want with money? She has more than she can use now! And who on earth do you suppose has rented the Ferguson house? You heard me speaking the other day of Mrs. Theobald?"

"I remember," Margaret said faintly. She had turned pale.

"Well!" said Mrs. Cutting triumphantly.

Margaret had risen; she was now at her dressing-table.

"Not—not Mrs. Cuyler Theobald of New York?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Certainly Mrs. Cuyler Theobald—my nephew's wife! And she comes back here, right under our noses, to get her divorce from him!" said Mrs. Cutting, in angry triumph.

"She—she is getting her divorce, you say?"

"Well, that's what old Wylie says—he always gets everything so mixed up!" Mrs. Cutting said vexedly. "But I can't believe that she'd do it!" she added, and was silent for a moment. "It'd be just exactly like what that girl *would* do!" Margaret heard her say, half-aloud, resentfully.

"Mrs. Cuyler Theobald—*here!*" Margaret said, as if in a dream.

"She was Shirley Wilson—there were three of them, Willard Wilson's girls," Mrs. Cutting supplied. "They were all pretty—this one was the oldest, and she was always a two-faced, sly little thing—I never liked her. Her sister married Blake Pond, afterward, and the little one married someone, too—one of the Watsons, I think. This girl was about nineteen, running round with the Baxter girls and Lily Priest, wouldn't say 'boo' to a goose, and then what does she do but run off with Tom Duncan! That was ten years ago; she was just twenty. You knew that she was engaged to Stan, wedding-day set and everything?" Mrs. Cutting added in a cautiously lowered tone. "A girl who would run off with a man in the first place," she went on, "and now back she comes to get a divorce! I won't have her in my house, I know that. Any woman who'll run off with a married man isn't any better than a—well, she's no better than a——"

"There were circumstances, perhaps," Margaret, who was very pale, suggested with an effort. But her employer promptly interrupted her.

"There's no excuse! None whatever. And Shirley Theobald will find out that other people feel as I do!"

"She never was married to Mr. Theobald?" Margaret asked.

"Oh, yes, she was married to *him*, fast enough, it was Duncan she ran away with. And that's what makes me so furious," Mrs. Cutting said discontentedly. "He's my nephew, you know, Cuyler Theobald, or rather he's my cousin Lizzie Pierson's child. He'd always called me 'Aunt Hattie'; he was out here the earthquake year, big fat spoiled boy —I showed you his photograph the other day." She sighed, rubbed her nose, settled into resigned tones. "I'd lost sight of him for years," she said. "He ran with a very fast set in New York, drinking and wasting money—he's run through

two fortunes, and he was married and divorced. He's the man that got all that newspaper notoriety by kidnapping the policeman, don't you—but you wouldn't remember! My husband was simply furious at the whole business, and he never would mention his name. He got his divorce abroad, and immediately afterward—that was four years ago, just after my husband's death, he and Shirley Wilson were married, in Paris. And now, Wylie tells me, she's been in Los Angeles since last November, pretending to be interested in the moving pictures, but really getting a divorce!"

"But first she had run away with some other man?" Margaret asked.

"With Tom Duncan, oh, yes! A man of forty-eight, with three children," the gentle droning voice went on. "Poor Mamie Duncan, she had lots of spirit, and she said that she didn't know whether to be most mad or most ashamed of him. Yes, Shirley went off with him to New York. He died there a few months later, and no wonder—there wasn't a decent man or woman who would look him in the face! And then Shirley went abroad, and we heard all sorts of things—of course the newspapers were making a lot of all this. You wouldn't think anyone would want to marry a woman like that, would you? But men are so strange. If a girl is pretty, what do they care? It wasn't any time at all before she married Cuyler. He's just about wasted all he had, I imagine," Mrs. Cutting added, shaking her head drearily over the whole situation, "but his grandfather, old Madison Richards, won't live forever, and then there'll be several millions, I suppose. But I declare I do think it's a disgusting thing to have her come back here," Mrs. Cutting added, complainingly, "after the way she treated Stan!"

"Did you say they were engaged?" Margaret said, in the pause.

"Engaged? Ha!" said Mrs. Cutting, angrily triumphant. "They were to be married in two weeks, bridesmaids and en-

gagement cups and everything. You never heard so much talk! Stan worshipped the ground she walked on—and she *is* a fascinating creature! Everything was settled. And then, one day, Mr. Cutting came home with the whole story, in the afternoon papers. Shirley Wilson had eloped with Thomas Duncan! Well, the excitement——! We got hold of George Priest and sent him to find Stan. My dear husband—you never knew him, but this was so like him"—interpolated Mrs. Cutting, with watering eyes—"he sent both George and Stan up to one of his big lumber camps in Canada. He said to George—I can see him, handsome man if ever one lived! —'Ride and tramp and fish,' he said. 'Shake it out of him, George!' And George—homely boy, but salt of the earth, said, 'Leave it to me, Mr. Cutting!' We didn't see Stan for five months, but he came home a *man*—all the boyishness gone, as my husband said! Poor Stan. I don't really know what he'll *do* if that—that woman dares to present herself, right here among us! But it would be like her! Bold. She's absolutely unscrupulous!"

Frowning, she fell into meditative silence, and Margaret sat still, trying to control the weakness and coldness that had swept over her.

"Is she—is she so charming?" she asked.

"Yes," Mrs. Cutting answered, decidedly, after thought. "She is. Shirley Wilson was one of the most magnetic girls I ever knew. She charmed—yes, she did charm everyone. It isn't alone beauty—although she has that, too. She had beautiful golden hair, as a girl. Of course I've not seen her for ten years—I have vegetable dishes marked with her initials upstairs, to this day—wedding presents. They came home from Shreve that very Saturday. I always meant to have them altered, and give them to some other girl, but I didn't quite like to take them back and have the 'S. S. W.' taken off." She fell silent: suddenly began again with a tut-tutting sound. "Dear me, I wish this hadn't happened—just

as the Strawberry Fête is coming on, and Cora Pond—that's her sister!—on the Publicity Committee with me! I'm fond of Cora, she was only a child when Shirley ran away. But I certainly will not recognize Shirley! No, I won't do that, and I don't think most people will."

"Strange thing, her coming right here," Margaret mused.

"Oh, my dear, she'll carry it off—you wait until you see her," Mrs. Cutting said bitterly, getting to her feet and gathering her robe about her. "I mustn't keep you up. That was an astonishing hand, wasn't it?—that five spades doubled. I don't know what Mrs. Wylie was thinking about! We would have put them up three tricks at least in their hearts, but it was better as it was.

"But now there's one thing you can do for me," she added, resuming her mild, complaining tone, at the door, and feeling her face gently, over the cold cream. "Will you do this for me, if this story of Shirley Theobald is true? Will you just mention it in my nephew's hearing, and see if he has heard it? I can't—you can see how awkward it would be. But *you* can, because you aren't supposed to know anything about it. Just mention it casually, and then he'll know, and the whole thing won't be rushed at him by some outsider at the club, or by his walking into Shirley somewhere. I wish the girl was in Jericho!" added Mrs. Cutting with feeling. "Now do for pity's sake get into bed, and don't attempt to get up in the morning. If Jim comes in, tell him poor Mummy's tired and has to sleep. Quarter past two—this is terrible! And I daresay that poor boy sees our lights and wonders if we are losing our minds!"

She was gone, leaving Margaret wakeful, chilly, nervous, in the big room. She had been up until two or three o'clock many times; she had always slept soundly, but she was jumpy and excited tonight. She made a pilgrimage to the nursery, before she got into bed, extinguished her light, and plunged her black head into the soft pillows.

But dawn was creeping over the old garden, and over the dewy rose-bushes, and the brick steps where Stan had given Margaret his hard big hand, before she fell asleep at last. She settled herself for the hundredth time, looked about the big room to see shadowless twilight dimly showing the big chairs and the great jar of lilacs on her desk; felt the cool morning breeze through the opened windows, and reflected wearily that there was no real harm in lying awake all night, at twenty-three. . . .

And was at last asleep.

Breakfast the next morning was a strangely exciting meal for both Stan and Margaret. Stanley, without analyzing his emotions, was pleasantly conscious of his own youth and health and high spirits, of the beauty of the scented early summer morning, and the enchantment of the garden, still drenched with dew where the shafts of yellow sunlight did not reach it, through the old trees.

The porches were damp when he came downstairs, the air was cool with a delicious promise of heat behind the coolness, and the old-fashioned, high-ceiled rooms, shaded by striped awnings, were open and empty. Jim's shouts came from the garden, and there was the liquid splashing of a dozen lawn-sprinklers contesting with bird-voices among the trees. Stanley went in the direction from which came the child's voice, hearing Margaret laugh. She looked up at him eagerly as he came across the dappled grass.

"There—do you hear that? That's a lark. I didn't know what it was, but McWhirter says it's a true California meadow lark!"

She was in tan linen, sitting on the lawn, looking delightfully crisp and fresh; her cheeks were glowing, the smoky, soft hair pushed off her forehead. Jim, all rosiness and affection and enthusiasm, wallowed upon her.

"I thought you would sleep late," Stan said, finding this

all that his fancy had painted it, and more, and willing to say any inane thing in the pleasure of the moment.

"This wicked boy comes in and wakes me!" she protested, tousling Jim; and catching his little face in her two hands to kiss it. Stan thought her human and accessible and nice in this morning mood. She was always charming in her relationship to the child.

"I wuff-house her!" announced Jim, triumphantly.

"Oh, you rough-house her? What a delightful awakening!" Stan commented.

"I mussed her hair, and I tore her nightie!" Jim further exulted.

She did not blush; her dark blue eyes met Stan's in quiet and composed amusement.

"We are sparing you none of the hideous details, Uncle Stan," she said, rising. "Come, Dimski. Run up and have Nora do your hair, for breakfast."

"How do you feel after only four hours' sleep?" Stan asked, still with that odd enchantment upon him, as they sauntered up the steps. He wondered if she remembered last night, and his helping hand, and thought he would like again to touch those firm and nervous fingers.

She glanced at him as if almost surprised at the little civility, and he remembered suddenly that it was only in his own thoughts that their relationship had altered since yesterday.

"I need very little sleep," she returned politely. But a sudden recollection of Shirley Wilson, and the hurt and humiliation he had endured at the hands of this unknown siren, made her soften, and she added, "Your aunt and I were talking until after two."

"I call that imposing on you!" Stan said. Margaret, who had now settled Jim in a high chair, and had brought a spoonful of the child's oatmeal close to her face to be sure that it was not too hot, made no reply. "I'll be hanged if I see how

you can stand it!" Stan added. "Shut up here with a delicate woman and a kid, never having any fun——"

"On the contrary," Margaret said, quickly disclaiming his sympathy. "Your aunt is a very unusual woman—unusually kind. I—I am only too happy to be with her!"

"*That's* what keeps you here!" Stan said, indicating Jim, from whose tiny thumb Margaret was now tenderly biting an invisible berry thorn. A radiant expression that he had never seen there before brightened her face; she sat down with a significant smile for the child.

"Jim and I understand each other!" she admitted simply. "I will never forget my first evening here," she added, "when he had been sick, and Mrs. Cutting was so anxious about him, and he went to sleep quietly, in my arms! He was just a year old. It seemed to me——" She stopped, and did not go on. But Stan knew that some personal heartache, some weariness after the buffeting and coldness of the world, had been cured by the weight of the little sleeping body.

"Here—give Miss Yorke her coffee first, Sadie," he said in sudden concern, to the surprised maid.

"I always have tea," Margaret said, also surprised.

"You do?" Stanley found this interesting. "Well, I think you're a sport," he said enthusiastically, returning to the previous topic. Margaret made no comment. She buttered a graham muffin for Jim before breaking her own; she glanced at a blowing window curtain and murmured to Sadie that the window must be shut, or the tall vase of lilies moved.

"And there *must* be less noise in the pantry, Sadie," Stan heard her say good-naturedly, almost humorously. He could tell that Sadie liked her. It amused him to study Margaret's youthful authority.

"They all like you," he commented. Again Margaret looked at him in quiet surprise.

"They feel that I am one of them," she suggested, indifferently.

"*Not!*" Stan laughed. He could have circled about her, like Jim, teasing her into responsiveness, leading her on. But in a few minutes he decorously departed; Margaret did not look up from the paper with her good-bye. The thought of her went warmly with Stan, a little recurrent thrill under the pleasant fabric of the cloudless, balmy summer day.

CHAPTER III

TEN days later a trip to the ranch was afoot. These were apt to be trying times for Margaret, for Mrs. Cutting changed her plans incessantly; she was never very enthusiastic about "Uplands," and why she went there at all the girl sometimes wondered. But "Ross" had loved the place, and his widow seemed to feel a certain obligation toward it.

So at irregular intervals, especially in the summer, visits were planned, much telephoning done, trunks packed and unpacked, appointments made and broken, and all the elaborate machinery of the Burlingame house demoralized and disturbed.

Rudolph was to go down Tuesday, with Sadie and Anna. Then he was to come back, for the bags. Nora would go down with him, Wednesday. Battersby, the superintendent of the ranch, was please to tell old Hang to have dinner ready Wednesday, and the rooms made up.

"Or no," Mrs. Cutting would amend, coming to Margaret's door in one of twenty comfortable soft dressing-gowns, "no. I believe I'll send you and Jim down with Rudolph and the bags—no, for Nora's going, too. That won't do. Or—I'll tell you!—Nora could go down Tuesday. But that gives us Jim Tuesday night, doesn't it? Oh, dear! Well, that's all right—we can manage that. Or perhaps—there's room for you all in the big car, isn't there?"

"Oh, certainly!" Margaret would say, in the pause.

"There is?" her employer would insist anxiously.

"What? In the Pierce? Why, surely. Even with the bags—oceans of room!"

"Well, then," Mrs. Cutting would say, with the air of one who moves mountains, "I do believe that's the best way. Then Stan can take me down in his beloved roadster." And at the door she might pause to readjust the entire matter. "As far as *that* goes, there's no reason why you and I shouldn't go down with Rudolph, it's much more comfortable, and have Stan take Jim and Nora. Jim adores the roadster, and Stan does *not* go so fast, when he has Jim. I don't see why that isn't really the best way . . ."

Margaret had to listen to a great deal of this, she could hear it, and answer it, without paying attention. The ranch was only a long hour's run away, and there were plenty of servants to insure the family's comfort at both places. On this particular occasion Mrs. Cutting did not make her final decision until some twenty minutes before they were actually supposed to be on their way.

"I think the Wylies' aunt, Miss Potter, may go down with us, Miss Yorke," she said anxiously. "Will that upset *everything?*"

"Why, no," Margaret assured her soothingly. "We might telephone Hang to tell the Spanish woman to have the porch room made up——"

"I had Stan do that!" Mrs. Cutting interrupted capably.

"Ah, well, then. There's always enough to eat, and enough beauty and sunshine for everyone," Margaret said, with her friendly look.

"My dear, you're a great comfort to me!" Mrs. Cutting assured her, sitting down on a trunk. "I didn't know whether to ask her or not," she said, with a deep sigh, of Miss Potter. "She was dying to come, and of course it means our game. She really plays so superbly that I feel it's quite fair to give her Stan—and Stan likes her. Rudolph is to stop at the Wylies' for her bag, and she and I'll go down in her car, and then she'll send it back. Now, Nora——"

"Nora and I with Rudolph and the bags?" Margaret tried

to supply. An anxious, weary look came over Mrs. Cutting's face.

"No," she said patiently. "I had it all thought out—it's gone out of my mind. I had it all thought out. Oh, yes. I told Stan that I'd meet him at the club, at four, after the tennis, and go down with him. But I want you to do that, because I want you to tell him about Shirley Wilson—Shirley Theobald, as I suppose she is now!"

"Oh, you've heard that rumor confirmed, then?" Margaret asked, pausing.

"Oh, yes—yes! It's only too true. And you'll have a splendid chance to tell him, today. I suppose Jim will cry—I said he might go down with Stan in the roadster. Let me see, I could take him with me, in the Pierce——"

"I can take him," Margaret suggested.

"But you're going with Stan—oh, yes, I see!" said Mrs. Cutting, brightening. "Take him with you in the roadster? I see. Yes—do that. It does take thinking out, doesn't it? Then Nora and Sadie—well, they can go with Rudolph, and I see no reason why they shouldn't start at once. So that's settled. Miss Potter and I could just as well go with Rudolph, as far as that goes, but it's all arranged now, and I hate to upset her. . . ."

The day was burning hot, when Margaret, with the immaculate Jim in the briefest of dark blue suits beside her, reached the Country Club. Trunks had been closed, and loaded upon the farm truck, suitcases had been packed, Nora had been cautioned, and old Sing, who had been a cook in the Cutting family for fifty-one of his sixty-eight years, had been formally bidden farewell. Margaret had finally whisked Jim into his clean linen and given him his woolly tan coat. She had scrupulously remembered to say good-bye for an hour or two to Mrs. Cutting and Miss Potter, and had run upstairs for the sun-glasses and the camera, and run to the kitchen, and back upstairs again, and had telephoned at

the last moment to Battersby, at the ranch, that Mrs. Cutting would be fifteen minutes late.

Then came her own hurried dressing: the dark blue swiss with the yellow dots, and the dark blue hat with the pond-lilies. And then she and Jim had walked, with much excited conversation, down the tree-shaded quarter-mile of lane that led to the club.

"Hot, Dimski!" panted Margaret, when they had found seats on the bleachers, and Jim was sprawling in his favorite attitude in her lap—where she could kiss the tip of his ear, now and then. The match was still playing; she was almost blinded by the dazzle of heat and bright colors, the blazing geraniums and marigolds, the roses and border-pinks, the awnings, and the flowered hats and striking gowns of the women.

There were a few cars parked beside the nets, a few women seated, and groups were forming and breaking, quite indifferent to the play. Men and women sauntered to and fro, and four youths, who obviously wanted this particular court as soon as the match was over, were hanging upon a low fence, jealously watching the rallies.

Jim instantly found the springing white figure that was Stan, and shouted a clear, "Hello, Uncle Stan!"

"S-sh!" Margaret said, hushing him, with her lips against his warm brown cheek. Stan paid no attention until he had smashed a ball at Willy Priest's feet. Then he shouted back: "Hello, Jim!" And to Margaret he added, "Five minutes! It's a deuce set!"

Margaret nodded; conscious of curious eyes about her, conspicuous for the moment. She sat on, glad to rest and be quiet after the seething and stewing of the day. She bowed to Jane Wylie and Joan Bishop; bowed to Mrs. Priest, and the Tubbses and the Bristols.

"Frightful!" she said inaudibly, when they all called at her the single word "Hot!"

The courts emptied; the two further contestants springing over the net. Another quartette sauntered on, another umpire mounted the box. The young men raised their balls with a simple touch of the racket's edge; sent a few practise shots flying into the nets.

Before she had expected him, Stan and the roadster appeared below the bleachers. Margaret helped Jim and the woolly coat down the big steps and smiled gravely at Stan.

He had had a shower; his mouse-colored hair was slick under the cap he raised. Two young women, wandering along, stopped by the low car.

"I would have given you and the youngster a lift home, Miss Yorke!" said Sally Hyde-Brown.

"Oh, we're going to Cupertino, to 'Uplands,'" Margaret explained, with her appreciative nod. "Mrs. Cutting went down this afternoon."

"Oh, but say—Stan, you're coming back for tonight!" said the other young woman, in alarm.

"It can't be done, Lee," Stanley answered, shutting the engine hood with upward jerks of the hasps, and leaning over his gas gauge to bat it with a hard brown palm. "Darn it, I think it's busted again," he said simply.

"Now, look here, Stan," said Miss Lee Galvin, crossly. "You've *got* to come back! Now listen—listen——"

She was over on his side of the car; her voice fell into one of low entreaty and reproach. Stan smiled indulgently, as his brown, strong face considered her agitated little flowerlike one, with its trimmed eyebrows and reddened lips. He had a long nose, Margaret noted, and rather fine grey eyes. A long nose, keen eyes a shade too far apart, a bronzed, firm skin, and a big mouth twitching now with amusement at Lee's agitation.

"Mama was ready to skin me, anyway," Margaret heard her say. "She hates Pierce, and she says the Calvert parties have come to be perfect riots—Daisy positively will not go

—there was too much booze last Thursday—I didn't touch it, but Madeleine Lake was terrible."

"Cut it out and come down with us to the ranch!" Stan suggested, wiping some oil from his fingers with a hideous rag. Margaret, now established with Jim in the low seat, felt once more a sort of sublime and scornful weariness sweep over her. The ranch, with its peace and quiet, was to be outraged by the unexpected presence of this flapper! She would squeeze in here on the front seat and absorb Stanley—not that it mattered, but Margaret was so tired of them all!

"Stan, I'd adore it!" Lee said, as Margaret had known she would. "Your aunt would lend me a nightie?"

"Sure," said Stanley. But he had not really meant the invitation, and Margaret could tell by his tone that he was wondering exactly how Aunt Hat would like it.

"I can see it—tucks and embroidery!" said Miss Galvin with a laugh. "Stan, it's *exactly* what I want to do. I can cut the whole thing tonight," she said plaintively.

Here, however, her friend lazily interposed a firm, "You *can* not! Why, you yourself asked the Baker girl to dinner at the club!"

"Oh, well, you can take her off my hands!" said Lee, easily.

"I could, but I won't," Sally Hyde-Brown said positively. "It's going to be an absolute frost, tonight," she added, "and I wish we were well out of it. But if you go down with Stan, I go too!"

"Come on—loads of room!" said Stan, feeling suddenly that there was safety in numbers.

"Not in the car," Sally observed. "And I couldn't, anyway."

"Sure there is—Miss Yorke can take the kid down with Rudolph," Stanley suggested; knowing from Lee's annoyed expression that the matter was already settled, and anxious only to get rid of the girls.

"Oh, no, it's ridiculous!" said Miss Galvin, with tears of vexation in her eyes. "Of course we can't—I was only fooling anyway! But if you don't come back tonight, Stan," she said viciously, in parting, "I'll never speak to you again!"

"No such luck!" Stan murmured, as the car got under way. "Whew—w!" he breathed, with a great gasp of relief, when they were out of the merciless sunlight, and the moving air smote them with a grateful coolness.

But the incident of the girls, trifling as it was, had chilled Margaret, and she maintained an unencouraging silence. It would have been so characteristic of Stan's insouciant casual selfishness, she reflected, to squeeze Lee Galvin and the Hyde-Brown girl into the roadster and throw all his aunt's plans into confusion.

She was silent, as they ran smoothly along the highway, between the hot lines of the young orchards, and through the hot, ugly little towns. Big signs and small, untidy shops; candy and gum and tobacco advertisements huddled in spotted show-windows. And then a world of fruit trees.

They turned off at Sunnyvale, they were in Cupertino, and had started on the circuitous hill road. Margaret, cooler now, and with her resentment fading, suddenly remembered her mission.

"Mr. Crittenden," she said, disposing Jim, who was drowsy, more comfortably in her lap, "did you hear about this young Mrs. Theobald, of New York, who's coming out here this year? Wilson, I think her name was——"

Stan was guiding the car skillfully about an unusually sharp turn; the sunshine blazing in his eyes from the furious west.

"Shirley Wilson," he supplied briefly, his jaw set.

"Yes, that was the name," Margaret said, a little bit frightened. "She—they were saying at the club yesterday," she added casually, "that she has gotten—or almost gotten —her divorce!"

Silence; they were on an awkward grade. Margaret sent the man's face a shy glance.

"Sure, I know Shirley," he said presently, in a comfortable tone that relieved her spirit like a great draught of spring water. "I used to be crazy about her. But I doubt—I doubt if she has the nerve to come back to Burlingame. I don't see why she should. Some of the boys were telling me that she's been in Los Angeles—established a residence there, and has cut Theobald loose. Well, I've not met him for years, but I saw him about three years ago, in New York, and I can't say I blame Shirley! He's an awful boob—drinks, and all that. He doesn't seem to have good sense, exactly."

"Your aunt was afraid it would—trouble you!" Margaret said hesitatingly.

Stanley laughed, but with more annoyance than amusement.

"Oh, Lord, isn't that just like Aunt Hat!" he said, impatiently. "No, she's an extremely clever woman, Shirley, and she used to be an extremely pretty one. But I have about as much interest in her now as I have in Nora!"

Margaret made a contented little sound in reply; her duty was done. There was a delicious breeze stirring up here in the mountains, infinitely refreshing after the hot day. Streams of living light poured through the tops of the forest trees, and as the rising road twisted and turned, they had the declining sun on the right, on the left, or sometimes directly ahead of them.

They turned north again, high in the hills, and ran between upland meadows where the curly-polled Herefords were grazing. The grass was already brown, and there was a scent of tar-weed and clean country dust.

"I begin to feel the utter delight of getting to the ranch," Margaret observed. She was surprised at Stan's expression of pleasure.

"Are you so fond of it?"

"I don't think there's any place in the world like it!"

They could see the farmhouse now, a plain wooden building set under a clump of oaks, with a great grove of enormous redwoods rising into a little wooded canyon behind it. Below it, the brown curves and shoulders of the hills dropped away a gradual two thousand feet, in a great slope, to the orderly orchards of the Santa Clara valley. Off toward the right, in a tangle of rail fences, were the superintendent's cottage, the great barns and sheds, the dairies, the stables, and the home orchard. Between the shabby buildings that were always peeling from their occasional baths of whitewash, were great trees, oaks, poplars, willows. A stream ran down from the woods, and was diverted to fill a swimming pool, and conserve itself in great tanks.

Only a typical, straggling, sun-burned California milk farm, but Margaret thought it the most enchanting place in the world. A child's heart—never long lost to a temperament like hers, always seemed to return to her here; she and Jim were equally eager to get into shabby old clothes, and be off upon the fascinating round of inspection that was their first duty at the farm.

Today Mrs. Cutting and her elderly guest joined them for the first stages. Margaret had put on a thin old white muslin, and an untrimmed leghorn hat; the length of Jim's faded, crisp old romper was perhaps an even twelve inches from his sturdy chest to a point some span above his sunburned knees. A straw hat was pushed upon his curls, his sandals danced ecstatically in the dust.

They peered into the dim, warm milking-sheds. The cows were in the stanchions; mild eyes strained to see them as the opening door let in a flood of mote-filled sunlight; the Portuguese milkers sang as they worked. Chaff, mash, the sweet breath of the Herefords, and the good ammoniacal odor of the barn floor mingled to make a scent Margaret always found delicious.

Outside, the longest shadows of the day were lying below windmills and barns; the lofty trees seemed to be holding the departing light. They found Stan in one of the sheds, in delighted consultation with Battersby, the superintendent, over a springy little new-born calf.

"Just five minutes old, and look at the vitality!" Stanley said delightedly. "This is the new strain, Aunt Hat!"

Mrs. Cutting was looking apprehensively at the mother, who was licking the little newcomer, with an occasional resentful glance at the callers.

"She had her calf right here outside the door," said Battersby, enthusiastically. "I was going to shut her up in here tonight, and I fenced her off, about three o'clock. When I come back——"

"Yes, I see!" Mrs. Cutting said hastily, dreading details. "This is the—the good strain—Stan?" she asked uncertainly. Her father and his grandfather had always been so wonderful about remembering the creatures.

"This is the Lancaster Champion strain," Margaret supplied. "Oh, you little beauty! Do you know that you have a pedigree, even if you are only a baby?" she asked, kneeling to lay her face against the nubbled, soft little head.

"She'll be an Uplands Champion," Stan said proudly. "She's no Lancaster!"

"Perhaps she's a Yorke!" Margaret suggested, smiling. She felt in a sudden mood of friendliness toward Stan. The older women had left the shed now, and were picking their way gingerly toward the gardens and wood. But Jim was beside Margaret, not very sure he liked the big cow, and making only nervous and jumpy little overtures toward the calf, but rapt with general felicity.

"That's a good name for her," Stanley said, struck. "Uplands Yorke Champion. Call her that when you register her, will you, Battersby? She looks like a winner, to me."

"She's a beauty!" the superintendent said, almost rev-

erently. He picked the ungainly baby up in his arms; the mother followed jealously, as they went out of sight between the barns.

Margaret and Stan walked after the others. It was one of her perfect hours, when she was relaxed, at peace in mind and spirit, and she had had sorrow enough, suffering enough, to appreciate it when it came. Utterly contented, she followed Stan and Jim about, commenting, exclaiming, admiring.

The big cemented swimming-pool, up above the house, was full; lights gleamed and moved upon the white-green of the water, and the pots of formal cypress were reflected, broken, and shakily restored again, as a breeze, or a bird's wing, stirred the pale jade surface. The water was so clear that Margaret could see dark leaves resting against the blue-painted bottom.

Beyond was the grove, where they were to have supper in a little while. Hang and his assistant were coming and going with baskets and pots; a great broiler of split chickens was already sending an appetizing odor out upon the air, and there was a ravishing hint of coffee. Blue smoke rose up into the clear soft afternoon light; the sun was not gone, but the rise of mountains was breaking the fierceness of the sunset, and the grove and the oaks about the house were already in soft blue shadow.

The two elderly women, the child, and the company of this friendly man were enough for Margaret, tonight. She didn't like Stan, she told herself, when he was with the idiots of his own set. But here, in his simple clothes, sitting on a redwood log and picking a chicken bone, between gulps of coffee from an enameled cup, he was oddly pleasing. After all, he was far better than the usual run of rich young men. It was just—it was just——

She found it hard to define. But he was a little too much all things to all men. His clothes were too correct, his man-

ner too artfully adjustable. He could be perfection with his aunt, recalling the late Ross Cutting with serious interest and devotion, pleasing her thoroughly with everything he found to say. He could dance with a débutante, or with a grass-widow of forty, with the same attentive charm. He dressed for golf, tennis, polo, yachting, hunting, with unvarying negligent perfection, and he seemed to change his nature with his clothes.

Which was the real Stan? None of them, Margaret fancied, but instead the eager, responsive host of tonight, a man whose sun-tanned face was almost ugly in its strength, and whose manner was entirely simple, like that of a contented boy.

But after dinner her softer mood toward him stiffened again. She had taken Jim into the close, wood-scented bedroom, in the warm dusk, and helped Nora settle him off for the night. When she came out to the sitting-room the air there was warm, too, but the card-table was set near an unlighted fire. The mountain nights usually turned chilly, when full darkness came on.

The older women were waiting; Margaret took her place and spread the pack for the cut. Almost immediately Stan joined them, and she saw that he was in evening dress. He was going to the Calverts' then, as Lee Galvin had begged him!

A certain deep restlessness and discontent seized her; she hated their hold upon him; he was much too fine for them, why couldn't he be happy here?

"Stan, you needn't have dressed, dear!" said his aunt, passing her first hand carelessly through her fingers after assorting it, and fanning it neatly.

"I may have to run up to San Mateo tonight, Aunt Hat." He adjusted his own cards with accustomed fingers.

"Stanley!" Mrs. Cutting ejaculated despairingly.

"But not until midnight," he assured her soothingly.

His aunt sighed and murmured something about her own selfishness where this dear popular boy was concerned.

The game went on; it was not midnight when Mrs. Cutting, tired with the unwonted exercise and the hot trip, declared herself sleepy. And immediately the group dispersed; Margaret heard the rushing sound of the roadster's motor and saw the wheeling lights across the low ceiling of her room while she was undressing.

"He could make himself very delightful to a woman, if he liked her," she thought. "And the woman who married Cuyler Theobald jilted him! It's funny . . .

"It isn't so awfully funny, the whole thing . . ."

CHAPTER IV

HE WAS home for breakfast the next day; went off again, and did not come back for forty-eight hours. Then they had him for a quiet week-end, a delightful week-end for them all. After that a score of uproarious friends came down, on a Friday night, and straggled away on the following Monday morning, after tearing madly through all the amusements that the ranch afforded. They swam, rode Stan's horses, played poker, bridge and tennis, dressed, ate and drank; they flirted, gossiped and, in more than one instance, quarreled.

Margaret found the seventy hours of their visit exhausting. Mrs. Cutting played the part of hostess, which meant that Margaret carried the heavy responsibility of manager-housekeeper; she had not a second free. The ranch-house and the guest houses were stretched to their utmost capacity; the very sight and smell of food sickened Margaret before the two days were over. Masses of chops, of broilers, more cream, more waffles, more berries—it seemed to her that she had never seen so much food under one roof before. The Chinese boys rose to the occasion nobly: layer cakes, salads, hams, pies, appeared as if by magic. Margaret and Mrs. Cutting congratulated each other wearily, when the last car honked away into the hot Monday morning, upon an experience that had undoubtedly been a great success.

Stan was pleased: that was the great thing to his aunt. She had her own room put into spotless order and went peacefully to bed with some new books.

Margaret and the Spanish women, with Nora, gathered a

great bundle of sheets and towels for the laundry, folded blankets, closed rooms, threw out dead flowers, lunched upon cold ham and turkey and capon, re-heated vegetables, re-cut cakes.

In the late afternoon peace descended once more upon "Uplands." Margaret and Jim had a swim; the girl washed her hair, idled and dozed in her steamer-chair under the oaks.

She wakened to silence, sunset, and the zumming of swift bees through the bright still air. The flowers near her were motionless; wallflowers and stock and gillies, all caught in the level descending rays as if by liquid crystal. Her eyes roved lazily, happily about: she sat erect, smiling confusedly. Stan was near her, in a basket chair, turning the pages of magazines.

Margaret blinked, brought her feet to the ground, and gathered her cloud of hair confusedly together.

"Stan!" she said. A moment later she could have bitten her tongue out; she had never called him that. But he did not notice it, or was it a part of his exasperating adequacy that at least he pretended that he did not notice it? "I thought you weren't coming home!" stammered Margaret.

She had been dreaming something extraordinarily sweet and pleasant about him, she remembered indistinctly, and the effect of her dream was to make her feel suddenly and most annoyingly embarrassed in his presence. Her heart was thumping oddly.

"I wasn't, Margaret," he said. It was deliberate; he had noticed her slip, then! He never had called her by her name. "But the truth is——" he began.

He paused, looked down at his magazine, smiled, shut it, and looked up again, laying it aside.

"The truth is," he said again, smiling in his friendly way. "I got to thinking about you, and all the nice things these people said about you, and I—sorter—thought I'd come home!"

Her reluctant smile was accompanied by a dark flush.

"You embarrass me," she protested, unencouragingly. She deliberately diverted the conversation. "You humiliate me," she said, "by saying they spoke nicely of me. *I've* been spending all day resenting the—the waste of this beautiful place upon them! They might just as well have been in —in Hale's Bright Bargain Basement for all they saw or cared about—*this!*"

Her gesture included the quiet hills, the motionless branches of the big oaks, the red and white cattle filing home beside long shadows to the milking-sheds.

"That's exactly it—but *I* care!" Stan said eagerly.

By this time Margaret's dark mop was somewhat in order, and she had sufficiently shaken off her dream to wonder if she had lost her senses. She had certainly never taken this tone in her rare conversations with Mr. Crittenden before, nor he this manner with her. It must stop. She had not so dropped her studied attitude of reserve, of remoteness, for months—for years, with anyone.

"You have me wrong, you know," the man went on, with a boyish sort of roughness in his voice. He took a neighboring chair. "I—honestly, I hate that sort of—oh, social thing as much as you do! I realized that, today. I'd much rather fuss around here with you and Aunt Hat and the kid, fixing him a hutch for his guinea pigs, and all that! You think I'm—you think——"

"No, I don't—naturally I have no right to—I don't think of you at all!" Margaret said, in an embarrassed and troubled voice.

"Oh, yes, you do!" Stan asserted simply, with a sudden significant flash in his grey eyes that made her heart begin to hammer. "We hated each other—last year," he reminded her, laughing. "But even that's—*something*. Isn't it?"

"I never hated you, Mr. Crittenden!" Margaret assured him, beginning to be oddly frightened. "I was unhappy when

I first came here—I had been ill. But I—no, of course I never hated you! And I'm—I'm glad to be friends——" she said confusedly, getting to her feet.

"Don't run away!" Stan said authoritatively. "Oh, by the way," he interrupted himself suddenly. "By the way, a wire came for you today; it was telephoned to the house, and I copied it down."

"A telegram!" She was suddenly tense; she turned pale.

He took a pencilled memorandum from his pocket; and without moving her eyes from his she received it from his hand.

"Excuse me!" she said, reading it. Stanley knew what it said, he had been conscious of surprise upon receiving it, of interest in it. It contained the words:

"No immediate occasion for alarm. Person you fear plans summer in Southampton. I will keep you advised, remain where you are. Am constantly concerned for your interest."

"It was unsigned, is that all right?" Stanley said, trying to be very casual, sorry for her, and noticing the effort she made to show no emotion in her expression.

"Unsigned?" she echoed confusedly. "I—yes, I thought so. I—I—it's nothing. Just some—some business of mine, that's all!"

Her agitation was so marked, and he felt so embarrassed to be a witness to it that Stanley tried to restore her usual calm by saying significantly and pleasantly:

"I'm quite aware, at least, that it's no business of *mine!*"

"Oh, it's not that!" she said with an apologetic laugh. "It's—it's someone I have been—annoyed by," Margaret added, somewhat regaining her composure.

"We all have worries!" Stanley assured her lightly.

She did not answer, except by a shamed smile. She read the message again and carefully tore it into minute pieces.

Immediately, and without leaving her chair, with the small, sharp stick that had been supporting a wallflower, she stretched out her brown firm hand, dug a small grave, interred the scraps within it, and neatly covered the scar.

All this was done without self-consciousness, and with that even promptness and smoothness of movement that always delighted Stanley in her. He had seen her, in these pleasant weeks at the farm, handling potted plants, young puppies, wet bathing suits, handling Jim's little cut fingers, his little scratched knees, with the same dexterous, certain thin fingers.

"It sounds like the first act of the melodrama," she commented, with a nervous smile. "It sounds as if I were the lady crook. But it means very little."

"I'm only glad that it didn't say 'leave at once; danger immediate,'" Stan said, pleasantly.

"Ah, well, I shouldn't have left—I couldn't!" Margaret assured him, her manner still a little nervous and unnatural. "It's business. But I was afraid that I might—have to go east."

"Perhaps that's the plot; perhaps you have large interests in the Street," Stan suggested again. But his comments were made indifferently, and with so obvious a kindliness that she knew he was merely trying to bridge the awkward moment. Curiosity was not suggested, and she did not satisfy it.

Instead she rose, murmuring something about finding Jim and Nora. She had promised Jim a tour of inspection before supper. She must pin up her hair——

She gathered up towels, hairbrush, book. Stanley had also gotten to his feet. The odd sudden magic of her presence was playing about him like summer lightning. They paused, and looked at each other in a little confusion and bewilderment.

"Was there something?" the girl asked.

"Something?"

"That you wanted me to do?" she supplied.

"No. I was just thinking——" he said. Margaret hesitated, not knowing exactly how to end the conversation.

"It's a funny dreamy sort of day," she suggested.

"How long have you been with my aunt, Miss Yorke?" Stanley demanded suddenly.

"Why—three years now," she answered, flushing uneasily.

"You're not—are you thirty yet?"

"No. Twenty-four. Nearly twenty-four."

"Gosh," Stanley said, interested. "I thought you were much older than that!"

She looked at him, beneath the fantastically piled black cloud of her hair, without comment.

"Didn't you wear glasses, when you first came?"

"Yes, I used to wear glasses," she conceded mildly.

"Don't need 'em now?"

"Not any more, no."

"Listen," he said, eagerly. "There was something I wanted to get over to you without hurting your feelings. I don't know whether I can or not! This week-end—well, this week-end everyone was *crazy* about you!"

She flushed and smiled.

"That's nice!"

"I mean—" Stan floundered on—"that they all said—well, how unusual you were, and that you weren't the regular companion type, see? They all said that—well, speaking French, and playing contract——"

"I'm glad if they liked me," she said, in the pause.

"I mean, it's perfectly obvious that you're—well, you're not—not what I've been sorter thinking!"

Her hair tumbled down, and she put down her book and brush, and busied her brown hands with its shining masses.

"I've always felt that you didn't like me much," Stanley said.

Margaret smiled, a little confused in her turn, with the color rising under her brown skin.

"Oh, but why shouldn't I?" she asked politely.

"I never—sort of—knew you before!" he said.

"This week-end——" she began, responsively, and stopped short. He felt a certain withdrawal filming her bright manner.

"This week-end—what?" he encouraged her.

Young, flushed with youth and beauty and summer, she stood looking down, with a troubled face.

"It seemed to me—very nice," she said evasively.

"It seemed to me that—well, I'd always thought you kind of despised me," Stan persisted. "But this week-end you were terribly nice to me!"

"That's good!" she said inaudibly, with a fleeting, uneasy smile. "I only have one hair-pin——" she murmured, complaining.

"Your hair is beautiful," he said, "let it alone! I came down just to see you, and to thank you for making everything so grand!"

"Oh, thank you!" Margaret said formally.

She turned to pass him, and Stanley put out his hand and detained her. The material of the cotton kimono she wore was thin; he could feel the warmth of the firm brown arm beneath it; her breast rose, and her blue eyes widened.

"My hair!" she said faintly. It had loosened again, it fell in a dusky cloud about her face and on her shoulders.

"It's beautiful!" Stanley said.

They stood still, looking at each other in the enchanted hour of sunset and summer. Suddenly brushes and book fell as Stanley caught at her hands, and brought them to his lips.

"Maybe, instead of hating each other, we've been liking each other, Margaret?" he said.

For a moment she regarded him, speechless, her breath

coming a little unevenly. Then she said, also in a whisper:

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"Yes. You—you mustn't talk like that!" she murmured, looking through half-lowered lashes into space.

"I'm not to like you?" he demanded.

Her answer was a swift, troubled smile.

"But that's the whole thing," he explained. "I've been right in your neighborhood for years without ever seeing you. And now I do see you, and I think you're grand!"

She smiled again, briefly, unhappily.

"Don't you want me to think you're grand?"

"Well, of course. But I never thought of——"

"Never thought of what?" he helped her, as she groped for words.

"Well, that——" Again she hesitated. "I'm your aunt's companion, and Jim's governess," she offered.

"All right. What of it? Why shouldn't you and I be friends, too?"

"Friends, certainly."

"But what do you think I want to do, make love to you?" he said, after a silence, with a little real chagrin.

"Well, no," she said, stoutly, flushing.

"But why not?"

"Because, in the first place," she argued youthfully, "I don't think you want to, and I don't want you to."

"How do you get that way?" Stanley said. "Don't you like people to like you?"

"Well, yes!" she said, still red-cheeked.

"But not me?"

"Not specially you. Not anyone," she said stubbornly. "I must think of—being fair," she recommenced, not quite coherently. "Fair to your aunt, and you, and me. I didn't see this coming——"

"Don't think I'm going to annoy you," Stanley said slowly, in a puzzled tone, watching her.

"I don't. I know you won't," she answered promptly and definitely, without an answering smile. "But you see—the thing is—" Margaret persisted,— "that—well, this must stop."

"Our friendship?"

"Not that. But anything more than that—anything special——"

This was not flirting. She had freed her hands, but she was not going to run away. She was looking at him squarely, with a courage that he found touching and gallant.

"Why may I not thank you for making my house-party such a success," Stanley asked, "and tell you that I have been thinking of you with gratitude—with affection, all day long?"

A flicker of troubled laughter brightened her anxious face.

"You may of course do that!" she said.

"That was all I meant!" he explained, aggrieved.

"Then—that's all right, then," she agreed, somewhat dubiously.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he assured her, floundering deeper and deeper into the intoxication of intimate talk with her every second.

"You didn't frighten me," she returned, almost with her usual composure. "I think I frightened myself."

They were walking now between the blooming borders and under the great oaks toward the house.

"Now, when you say a thing like that, what am I to think?" Stanley demanded. Margaret laughed quite naturally.

"I didn't mean that I was frightened, of myself," she explained. "But that I hadn't thought——"

"Thought what?" he said, in a pause.

"That anyone—anyone would—like me, again——" she began, unguardedly.

"Again!" Stanley's senses were swimming. "Did you—did something unhappy happen to you?" he asked, lowering his voice.

"Something very unhappy."

"And you can't talk about it?"

"Not yet."

Silence. Then he said:

"Since you came to Aunt Hat?"

"Long before that."

"You must have been very young."

"Eighteen."

"But you haven't forgotten him?"

"No."

There was another pause while they walked along through a strange new world. Stanley broke it.

"I have to tell you that all today I've been thinking about you. I'm afraid I'm falling in love with you."

"I'd much rather you didn't," she said, quite simply.

"But if it could happen to me this fast, Margaret, mightn't it happen to you?"

Her smile was exquisitely kind—too kind. Her voice was maternal.

"It would ruin my only chance of happiness in life, if it did," she said slowly.

"You mean you still care for—someone else?"

"More than myself!" she said, in a low tone, after a moment.

"Even though he made you so unhappy?"

To this she made no answer. In the silence Stanley suddenly laughed. Still walking along she looked sidewise at him, inquiringly.

"I was thinking—how little I meant all this!" he said.

"You didn't mean it?" she asked, in such genuine pleasure

and relief that he laughed again, this time in some little mortification.

"What I said to you? Oh, yes, I meant it all, in that sense," he hastened to say. "What I was trying to say was that I hadn't planned it—hadn't the faintest notion of saying more to you than just thanks for being so fine about everything this week-end."

"Did you say more than that?" she asked, with her pleasant quiet manner quite restored.

"A good deal," he answered drily. "You're very generous, but I'm—I know enough of the symptoms, in short, to realize what's happening to me!"

"Oh, no!" she said, with a fluttered laugh.

"Well, I tell you it's so," he said.

Again Margaret did not answer.

"There's something I'd like to say to you, and then we'll forget all this nonsense!" she presently said shyly. "I would like you to know that it has—done me good, talking like this. I was all—boxed up, in myself. But I used to love—of course I was only a little girl, then. But I used to love—boys to like me. And I'm glad you do, and whatever I could do this week-end I was only too—too happy to do!"

"And that's that?" he asked.

"Please," responded Margaret.

"All right," he said. "I've been thinking of seeing you, all day," he added, reproachfully, "and of telling you that a particularly pleasant house-party was almost entirely your doing——"

"Ah, that?" she said, good-humoredly. "You may tell me as much as you please, that way!"

"And suppose I feel that you may be a person, *decidedly*, to like in another way?" Stanley persisted stubbornly.

"Then you would be *decidedly* mistaken," Margaret assured him. "There are a great many women whose hands you can kiss," she added, laughing, "but I am not one of them!"

"I didn't mean—kissing," Stanley said. And with an engaging little modulation of his voice he went on: "Mayn't we be friends? I hate to feel that you aren't willing to be friends. Don't you like me?"

Her blue eyes, unaffected at the beginning of these phrases, softened suddenly, and she seemed for a second to be shaken, to be a trifle confused. It was in a gentler, less assured voice that she said:

"You—you're very kind. I do appreciate it. It's been a long time since anyone has been so kind to me. I hadn't thought that there was anything in me that you could possibly—admire."

"Yes, and suppose I don't stop—admiring you?" Stanley teased her, half-serious and half-perverse.

"Oh, but you will—nonsense!" she said quickly.

Stanley, unable to analyze his own persistence, yet irresistibly held by some perturbing charm, faced her about, at the foot of the porch steps, and took her hands.

The touch weakened her suddenly and unexpectedly, and he saw that it did. She stood, breathing hard, fear in every line of her beautiful dark face, and her blue eyes smouldering with excitement.

"How sure you are of yourself, Margaret!" he said, with his friendly smile. "Or are you?" he added, shrewdly, as the color rushed to her face.

Margaret merely looked at him, and he was shocked and ashamed to see that her lips were trembling and that she could not speak.

Instantly he released her hands. She turned without a word, and went, not too quickly, up the steps.

"I'm sorry—I'm awfully sorry!" Stanley said, not moving until she had disappeared. He had never seen her break before. The thought of those smooth, thin, vital hands, of that flushed, troubled face in its frame of dark hair, stirred in his veins like wine.

Three hours later they were quietly playing bridge, in the usual fashion of farm-evenings. But in no sense was this a usual evening for Stan. He began to realize that this woman had taken possession of his imagination. He could not keep his eyes from her, his thoughts from her.

Her eyes were red; he admired the simplicity and bravery with which she ignored them. She was quite herself, impersonal, pleasant, appreciative. Stanley could not strike a spark from her tonight.

But at midnight, when all four players stepped out to the porch to look at the rolling hills, and the sloping meadows, steeped in silvery moonlight, he seized the opportunity for an awkward apology.

"I'm very sorry, Miss Yorke," Stanley murmured, close beside her and some feet away from the others.

He saw her eyes flash in the moonlight, and impulsively her warm thin hand touched his own.

"You mustn't say that," she said, slowly, after a moment. "You seemed to waken up some part of me that was frozen—just by showing me that a man could—like me, again! I've been crying," she went on simply and childishly, "and I never cry. It's done me good, I feel more like my old self. It was like a tightness—like a smothering—lifted from my heart. So don't be sorry. . . .

"And I'm glad you spoke of this again," she added, after a pause. "Because there's something I want you to know. My life isn't like other women's lives. I'm—I'm bound. I'll never—be free to think of any man."

"I'm sorry!" Stanley said, simply, in the silence.

"I have to fight it out alone," Margaret said. "I'm—terribly alone. I'm always afraid. I can't tell you why."

"You needn't be afraid, here," Stanley reminded her, very low.

"I'm less afraid here than anywhere. This is sanctuary, to me. I have to work, and read books, and get interested

in other people's lives—that's all that can save me. And I have that here!"

"Why wouldn't my—my falling in love with you make it even safer?"

A long silence. She was looking away from him as he spoke; she shook her head. Presently she turned, and in the dappled moonshine and shadows of the grape-vine he saw the glitter of tears on her cheek.

"Never!" she breathed unsteadily.

"Are you there, Miss Yorke?" Mrs. Cutting said.

"Right here!"

"Did Stanley go in?"

"Yes, he's gone." It was indeed true; she was alone.

"Well, I think it's a good example for us all to follow!" Mrs. Cutting suggested.

She was in a talkative mood. Margaret went into her room with her and listened to a long dissertation as to the attitude of servants toward good masters. Mrs. Cutting always liked her servants, and they always adored her.

"But you're not interested, child."

"Indeed I am," said Margaret.

CHAPTER V

THE Ferguson house, rented for the summer through its owner's cupidity, and to the neighborhood's deep resentment, to Shirley Wilson Theobald, was planted in the very heart of old and conservative Burlingame. Its western boundary touched the Priests' garden for some forty irregular feet, its gateway and the Rivers' aristocratic old gateway were entwined by the same clustering ivy, and its little sunken garden, at the rear, could be seen from the Rivers', and the Bristols', and the Wylies' back windows.

It was a small estate, less than an acre, and tucked in crosswise between a dozen more distinguished and spacious homes; there was a sort of sentiment about the little Ferguson place, and this sentiment was outraged upon a certain May afternoon when Shirley Theobald, her maid, her cook, and Lucy, an old colored factotum of the Wilsons, moved in.

Society had decided, with an instant firmness that needed almost no words, that Shirley was not to be forgiven. Matrons of Mrs. Cutting's type would not even discuss her; Mrs. Cutting had had to say kindly and finally, to Shirley's sister, Cora Pond:

"You know how I feel, dear. You must *not* ask me—I expect you to save me from——"

And Cora, who was a plain young woman without any of Shirley's charm, and who conspicuously lacked Shirley's brilliance and refinement, said, with blazing cheeks:

"Of course not. I know! Mama feels that way, too—at least, Mama understands! Of course she's seen Shirley—and all that. No, I won't, Mrs. Cutting!"

Thus Cora, stammering and secretly furious at the sister who could place her in so wretched a position, just as she, Cora, was making a real social start!

"Because I could not," Mrs. Cutting said to Margaret Yorke. "I could not. After all, I am Cuyler Theobald's second cousin!"

Almost every woman in the colony had some equally valid reason for feeling that Shirley must be ostracized; ostracized all the more definitely because she had shown so callous an indifference to the possible censure of her own old friends. Margaret, watching the Ferguson house being put into order for the new tenant, wondered—wondered—wondered what sort of a woman this Shirley could be.

But Mrs. Theobald kept closely to the house for many days, seeing nobody but her sisters and a few intimate and loyal old friends, and there appeared to be no immediate question of just how she should be treated at teas or at the club, for the excellent reason that she appeared at neither. She kept a small car, and occasionally drove into town; for the rest she apparently read, rested, gardened, practised her songs and took solitary tramps with her Belgian police dog, with neither need nor desire for other company.

Margaret was deeply amused to note the effect of this line of conduct upon the other women. Curiosity about Shirley deepened steadily; and when it was known that the very important Elise de Vilbiss was going to see her almost every day, there was a sensation in Burlingame unequalled even by the original announcement of Shirley's coming.

Elise was in mourning, true, and she liked to sing duets with Shirley; they had sung duets when they went to Miss West's school years before. Stupid, influential, enormously rich, and widowed, she had presumably been bored into accepting Shirley's overtures.

"Shirley used to walk up past my place simply because it's the loneliest road anywhere about here and she didn't

want to meet anyone," explained Elise, who was dull enough, and rich enough, to carry off any situation, "and she used to cut across the shrubberies—she thought I was in Europe. I walked right into her one day, and I was so glad to see her—she's just the same dear old thing! And she didn't know me, since I've taken off so much weight! She says that woman has done *miracles* with my voice! I go to her house for our singing because she doesn't want to see anyone—yet. She's simply crushed. She says she put up with enough from Cuyler Theobald to get a hundred divorces. Only, she said, 'Elise, I'm the one woman in the world that won't be forgiven for making a failure!'"

"And there," said one of the women who listened, later, to Margaret, "there you have Shirley! She wouldn't waste time on the rest of us—not she. She goes straight for Elise, and Elise will be having her up for one of the barbecue suppers—you'll see!—before the summer's over."

One day Margaret and Mrs. Cutting were at the magnificent Randolph place, where the Strawberry Fête was in progress. For fifty years almost a mile of stone fencing had shut the Randolphs from intrusive eyes. The highway ran straight by the property, but so magnificent and so dense were the woods, and so enormous was the tract that now lay right in the village, that no outsider ever had the faintest idea of what the gardens were, and what the house looked like.

Mrs. Jessop, who had been Fan Randolph, and who was now a stout, plain, rather hirsute, intelligent and self-satisfied woman of fifty, had offered the place for the Fête, and this was felt by her enthusiastic friends to be almost enough in itself to insure a financial success. From that moment everything, needless to say, had been mismanaged consistently and expensively: the newspapers had been antagonized, the villagers had been affronted, the tickets had not been printed correctly or in time, the program had suffered many and violent changes.

But here was the hot, aromatic afternoon at last, and Sally Hyde-Brown and Marian Tubbs in daring costumes selling popcorn for twenty-five cents a ball, and Eliza Bristol and Lee Galvin giggling over tickets at the gate, and giving wrong change, and deserting their posts so frequently that a rabble of small boys had broken in and were being resented by one and all. The stately old grounds were half-heartedly draped with wilted bunting, and with Chinese paper lanterns that had run, in the morning fog, from blazing oriental scarlet to mild and streaky pink; ineffectual barriers had been placed here and there, and exploring groups swarmed over them and surprised a resentful cook grinding ice-cream for the family dinner in the kitchen yard, and Grandma Randolph sequestered in a secluded summer-house under the pleasing delusion that Fan was just having a little party for the children.

There were plenty of free admissions for girls who were to sell cakes and serve tea and raffle dolls, and who were needed for the tableaux, and almost all the young men got in free; so that, by six o'clock, accidents of all sorts, and a general sense of having brought forth from a mountain of labor a mouse of result, were making the middle-aged matrons somewhat acid, dishevelled, and disheartened.

What Mrs. Hyde-Brown called "the elephants"—meaning the heavy-footed villagers and their artless interest in the doings and environs of the great—had pretty well disappeared by this time; the elephants were early diners, and some of them had toddling children and baby carriages to get home. There were left several groups of still flirting and whispering girls and boys, all assistants or performers, and a few stragglers.

Mrs. Jessop, and a group of her associates, sat upon the demoralized side-porch, exhausted and disgusted. Hot sunshine was streaming across the garden, and a hot wind was blowing paper napkins and broken toys and scattered con-

fetti fitfully across the trampled brown grass. Bushes were crushed, candy and popcorn were trampled into the paths, fences and gates were sticky, strings and papers and popcorn wrappers were generally strewn about. The large sign: "Theater. Continuous Performance. 50c." was lop-sided, and the paint had run from the letters in vertical streams; everyone was weary, dirty, and discouraged.

"I suppose we have to have these things," said Mrs. Jessop, apologetically. "Miller, take away that broken booth. Don't attempt to save the bunting—it's all mixed up with the wood. Just burn the whole thing!" she added, to a gardener. "I arranged for five hundred," she said, sighing.

"Only a hundred and thirty-one came," said Mrs. Pullen.

"Oh, nonsense! There must have been a thousand here!" said more than one voice surprisedly.

"Oh, no, there weren't!" Mrs. Jessop said; "we just counted the gate-receipts." She ran a large, heavy, aristocratic hand through the tickets and dollars that were mingled in a cigar-box.

"I think that's terrible, Fan!" Mrs. Cutting said, shaking her head. "I thought they'd *all* come. They've never had a chance to see this place before!"

"Papa never would have allowed it," said the hostess, in a tone of regret for her unprecedented generosity, "and Mama doesn't know now—unless some of the elephants got to her! Oh, dear——"

"Oh, dear!" said the others, sighing.

Margaret, who was serving the tired women with tea and sandwiches, smiled deep in her soul. Half-a-dozen rich men would now be taxed several hundred dollars apiece, and the women would have hot baths, rest, and dinner, with plenty of flattery and congratulation, and in a few days they would begin to seriously believe that the Strawberry Fête for the hospital had been a great success. Tonight there would be an inferior entertainment in the barn, at which the best places

would be shamelessly reserved for the friends of the directors, and at which the flower of the Peninsula aristocracy would get up an ineffectual attempt to entertain: singing badly, changing the program, forgetting lines, and laughing excessively in the pleasant surety that just to see them at all—Priests and Castlemans and Lakes and Wylies, would be privilege enough for any audience.

Meanwhile, her own rôle was simple. She was simply an onlooker, the pleasant, the useful, the indispensable Miss Yorke. She poured the hot tea carefully, she had a cheerful and encouraging word for everyone to whom she passed it.

"Don't say that, Mrs. Jessop. You'll feel so differently when you're rested. It was *so* successful."

"Oh, thank you, dear," said the unapproachable Mrs. Jessop, gratefully taking her tea. "Perhaps I shall! One *has* to have these things. . . ."

It was just at this time that Elise de Vilbiss, stout, magnificently dressed, and with her Pekinese under her arm, arrived at the Fête. Elise never had to hurry; all dinners, dances and strawberry fêtes awaited her respectfully. When her big limousine swept over the scarred and littered drive, Mrs. Jessop herself arose, with a glance at the deserted booths. At least they could show dear Elise the decorations and the stage, and perhaps she would buy the dreadfully uninteresting three-thousand-dollar jade tablet that Carter Emory had donated.

With Elise was a pretty, fluffy-headed woman, slender and smart in white, with a flowered, floppy hat shading her intelligent, lovely face. She looked delightfully fresh in this group of jaded and rumpled women. Margaret noted the exquisite clear complexion, with peach-color on the babyish cheeks, and the golden glints in the thick soft hair. The stranger carried a handsome gold bag, initialled in amethysts, her hat spoke clearly of Paris, she had the manner of a person always the centre of her own world, like a ship.

"It's Shirley Wilson—it's Mrs. Theobald," Lily murmured, in answer to Margaret's questioning glance. Margaret felt her heart give a great plunge, her mouth filled with salt water, she felt weak. Fortunately nobody noticed her, for the arrival of the much-debated Shirley had thrown all the women present into an intense self-consciousness, and everyone, in her separate way, was attempting to deal with the situation.

One or two, to their later complacent self-congratulation, immediately grasped the bull by the horns, and briefly and swiftly departed. But Mrs. Jessop and Mrs. Pullen and Mrs. Wylie were already actually out of pocket through the Strawberry Fête, and they saw in Elise a power too great to be disregarded. Elise was not generous, but she had not come here to buy the wilted, handled aprons, the packages in the grab-bag, and the silk pin-cushions. She had come to leave a check, and if she had had the poor taste to bring Shirley Theobald with her, then, for the moment at least, Shirley Theobald must be accepted.

So these matrons greeted the intruder with a barely civil "How do you do, Shirley?" and then surrounded Elise, and presently Mrs. Wylie bore her away toward the scene of the late festivities. The other women averted their eyes, laughed nervously over their sudden plans for departure, and murmured absorbedly among themselves.

Margaret, shaking, walked down the wooden steps to the path; her back toward Shirley. Jim, brought by the faithful Nora, rushed upon her. She heard Shirley, who was apparently entirely unconscious of any awkwardness, address Beatrice Jessop, an awkward, big, nicely-groomed girl of fifteen, who came innocently up with some message for Mrs. Pullen.

"You're not the Jessop baby?" said Mrs. Theobald, waylaying the child with a carelessly friendly air. "Good gracious, you were running about with a Teddy Bear five minutes ago!"

Beatrice, who had long before this time discussed the Theobalds fully with her intimates, and knew more than even her mother did of the case, turned brick color. She made a spasmodic motion toward her nursery curtsey, remembered that Mademoiselle had said that now she was too big a girl for that, choked, murmured inaudibly, and stood still.

Her mother, who was confident that Bee didn't have the faintest idea of society's reason for snubbing Shirley Wilson, still didn't want the child to give Shirley an opening, and so said, in her nursery tone:

"Here to Mother, dear. Thank you, my darling. Run along, Bee, we shan't need you!"

Beatrice, breathing deeply, and confident in her boiling heart that she had somehow disgraced herself and everybody else, escaped. She would lie awake tonight imagining that everyone was laughing at her terrible manners, and wishing heartily that she was dead. But meanwhile she joined Mrs. Cutting's Miss Yorke, who was always so kind and pleasant, and who was walking, with the little Cutting boy, along a deserted path.

And with them, she was surprised and a little pleased to discover, was suddenly Mrs. Theobald herself, the romantic and bad and beautiful Mrs. Theobald. She had closely followed them. Beatrice was to have another chance to show this ravishing person that she, Beatrice, was really a girl of poise, wit, and spirit, well-educated, and so funny that when she was with the other girls they were always "roaring."

Miss Yorke looked oddly pale and unnatural today, looked actually sick. But little Jim Cutting was, as always, adorable.

"Introduce us, won't you, Bee?" said Mrs. Theobald, pleasantly. "I don't think we were introduced?" she said to Margaret. "You left the porch just as I was going to ask Lily Priest to present me."

"I'm—my name is Yorke," Margaret said, turning her

blue eyes honestly toward Shirley. "I'm Mrs. Cutting's companion—I help her with the little boy."

"Oh, I knew who you were, I've seen you in the lane with the child!" Shirley responded, easily. "But I've seen you somewhere before?" she ended, interrogatively.

"I—I don't think so," Margaret stammered, thickly. Bee Jessop looked at her in surprise; she was usually surprisingly nice to Bee and Bee's group, who regarded all persons employed in Margaret's capacity as inclined to be old and dull.

"You've been in New York?" asked Shirley.

"As a child, yes," Margaret admitted.

"Well, you look like *somebody*——" Shirley mused. But immediately she noticed the child. "So they did adopt one at last, did they?" she asked, indifferently.

"More than three years ago," Margaret told her.

"You know Mrs. Cutting is Mr. Theobald's aunt," Shirley said enlighteningly. "Second cousin, really, I believe it is. But he always called her 'Aunt Hattie,'" she went on conversationally. "I met him first at her house, as a matter of fact—d'you mind my talking? I always talk! I remember him perfectly, although I was a kid, like your adorable friend here. He had polo-ponies, and he played golf, and he had a valet—of course we all thought he was the last word in magnificence!"

Margaret found nothing to say to this, but as they walked on Shirley chattered unabashed. Beatrice was thrilling to the music of the simple phrase "adorable friend", said in the wicked Mrs. Theobald's wonderful voice. How she would love to have tea with Mrs. Theobald some day, to do something for her! If a pony was running off with her, or if she cheated at tennis, and nobody but Bee saw it——!

"Isn't it funny that both Mama and Papa have blue eyes, and my brother Randolph has blue eyes," Beatrice said, "and mine are brown?"

"It's not so funny as it is lucky," Shirley assured her, casually. "If I had a little girl with those pretty eyes, she'd do some pretty heavy damage before she got through."

This was terrifying, ecstatic, intoxicating. Bee could do damage, her eyes were pretty. She almost suffocated with felicity and nervous shyness as she walked decorously along. If she spoke, she might be incoherent and stupid. But if she didn't speak, Mrs. Theobald would think she was a dumbbell.

After wretched indecision she said laughing uncomfortably:

"But what if the owner of pretty eyes had made a vow, with her chum, never to flirt?"

At this Shirley suddenly and surprisedly looked at her, as if for the first time aware of her presence. An odd look narrowed her eyes and twitched at her mouth for a second, as she asked:

"Who is your chum, Kiddy?"

"Marie Louise Pearsall," Bee responded promptly. "She's a girl who absolutely has to be led in everything, and Mama says that I bully her terribly, and that she doesn't dare to say her soul is her own," she said lightly and rapidly. "Even years ago, when we were always starting clubs, at school, I was always the president, or else I wouldn't play, and poor Marie Louise meekly let me do as I liked, but she is absolutely loyal to me, and thinks I am the most wonderful person in the world, which is nonsense, as I am a perfectly commonplace person!"

And Bee ended in a burst of laughter.

"Would Mother let you come and have tea with me some day?" Shirley asked, in a low tone, after a serious side glance.

"Of course she would, and I'd adore to come!" Bee said instantly and fervently.

Shirley smiled and nodded, and the smile was engraved upon Bee's heart, but Miss Yorke, probably jealous, she

noted, had to look grave, and to faintly shake her head, and no doubt it was due to buttinsky Miss Yorke, Bee reflected bitterly, that Mama somehow heard of the tea-plan, later, and forbade it.

Mama, as it chanced, called her now, and she had to leave the fascinating company beside her, and go back to the house. Mrs. Theobald and Margaret Yorke walked on together.

"Tell me," Shirley began, with bright deliberation, "does Stan Crittenden live with his aunt, now? Do you see much of him?" she added, as Margaret answered only by a nod.

"Whenever he is at home," Margaret responded, in a mildly surprised voice.

"Isn't he charming?" asked Shirley.

Margaret, conscious that she could not answer this question as indifferently as she might have done a month ago, and feeling the blood in her face, said nothing in words.

"He's the dearest fellow that ever lived. I haven't seen him to speak to since I came home," Shirley went on, after a keen glance. "I did see him at the club on Sunday, playing golf, and he's stunninger than ever!" she added. "You know I've always been especially fond of him, since I was a baby, and we were engaged, years ago," she told Margaret. "Did they tell you that?"

"Oh, yes!" Margaret said.

"I suppose they've all been doing an awful lot of talking about me," Shirley mused. "They would, of course. Hattie Cutting hates me like cold poison in a cup, I know that." She paused, half-expectant, but as Margaret did not deny this, presently the other woman went on, scornfully: "Well, I wish they knew something about me, before they settle everything! Mr. Theobald is a man with many fine qualities," she said. Margaret knew well this generous attitude, so popular with the divorced. "But I couldn't—I'll tell you some day, and you'll realize that I simply *couldn't* go on," she went

on, with her characteristic frankness. "Just now I'm in wrong everywhere," Shirley resumed. "No matter, it will pass. Only I can't get over old Hattie Cutting putting her nose in the air. I hate them all, anyway," she finished illogically. And immediately she added that favorite phrase of the woman who has put herself into a false position. "I have wonderful friends, and they have been simply splendid," said Shirley, "and about the others I don't care!"

By this time they had made the round of the gardens and lawns and had come back to the steps again. Elise de Vilbiss was duly writing a check, with somebody's fountain-pen; almost all the other women had gone, the De Vilbiss car was obviously waiting, and Stanley Crittenden's car had just swept about the drive. He had come to bring his aunt home from the party.

Margaret saw the meeting. Shirley went up to him gracefully, with an outstretched hand, and big and rumpled in his tennis clothes, and with a deeper color upon his reddened face, Stan took her hand and grinned at her.

"Stan, you've not changed one bit!" Shirley said, flushing charmingly, with admiration in the bright brown eyes that took in his bigness and broadness.

"You're prettier than ever!" he said readily, with his pleasant smile. He helped Elise into the car, helped Shirley, and turned to Mrs. Jessop and his aunt. "All ready?" he asked. But Margaret fancied there was something just a little self-conscious in his heightened color and hurried air.

Mrs. Cutting, serenely and elaborately oblivious, got into the front seat beside him; Margaret had Jim and her own reflections for company on the drive home.

CHAPTER VI

SOMETIMES, remembering that talk at the farm only a few weeks ago, it seemed to her like a dream. She had recalled it a thousand times: the hot, sweet afternoon, her exhaustion after the house-party, and her waking, in a cloud of drying hair, to find him studying her.

Everyone was kind enough to her; Nora, Mrs. Cutting, the few persons with whom her life here brought her in touch. But that afternoon had been more like the old days, when she had had a life of her own, a personality.

She liked to remember his kindly speech, her own confidences, the sense of renewing, of awakening once more. There had even been a day or two of disturbed dreaming, after that; a day or two when the possibility of his caring for her, and the thought of all it might mean, had wrapped her in a sort of spell. All her thoughts had circled about, and centred upon, that memory, when for a moment a man's arms had been about her, and when the wearisome silence of so many months had been at least partly broken, and the reserve that had grown so burdensome had been partly relaxed.

On the day after their talk at "Uplands," Margaret had awakened to find Stanley already gone, and all through its long quiet hours she had been teased by a desire to see him. Not to say anything particularly significant; no, rather to lessen than deepen the effect of yesterday's talk. But just to see him, just to realize again that there was that little special relationship between them, that consciousness of his liking her, admiring her, had been a sort of hunger in her soul.

"I don't love him, and he doesn't me," she had said to herself more than once. "But—but I am awake again. I haven't felt this way, this interested, trembly, excited sort of way, for years!"

She had felt this hunger keenly all that day; life had been oddly flat and pointless without Stan. Margaret, when Mrs. Cutting was dozing, in the afternoon, and Jim and Nora down at the creek, had brought her steamer chair to the exact spot where it had been two days ago, and had lain dreaming in it, her book closed, her eyes only half-open, her thoughts wrapped again in the memory of that surprising hour.

Three days later they had come home again. And at the dinner hour, when Margaret had been in the conservatory off the living-room, discussing the housing of three tiny turtles with Jim, she had heard the front door close, the familiar quick step, and—at last!—the voice for which she had been half-consciously awaiting. Stan's voice.

"Hello, Foote! Telephone Rudolph and have him bring round the roadster, will you? I guess she's fixed by now. And I'm late!"

Jim had rushed out, and a moment later Stan had come in, the child hanging eagerly to his hand.

"Turtles, hey?" Stan had said. And then, "Hello, Miss Yorke. Who wished these turtles onto us?"

"The Fernald boy," Margaret had said thickly and incoherently, taken unawares by unwelcome agitation. She could not look up—she could not look up.

Stanley had inspected the little coasting and slipping newcomers, upon their rocks, for a moment. Then he had leaned over her, and said lightly and kindly:

"Everything all right?"

"Everything fine!"

"Still mad that I like you?"

She had been able to flash him a protesting, shocked smile.

"I never was *mad*."

"Everyone says that that was the *best* week-end we ever had at the ranch!"

"I'm glad."

And then he had suddenly been quite serious.

"I like you very much, and I want to say to you that you'll never—" he had begun, and hesitated. Finally he had finished it briskly—"you'll never have any reason to worry about me!" he had said.

"Oh, thank you!" And Margaret had felt oddly flat.

"See? We're good friends."

"That's enough," she had agreed, smiling.

"So there you are, and where are you?" Stanley had ended the conversation cheerfully. "You're up against it, somehow, and you're happy here, and let it go at that!"

"That's the way I would like it," Margaret had said simply and timidly. But even then she had been conscious of a certain vague sense of disappointment. She had showed him a face suffused with color, dark eyes full of gratitude and friendliness, and they had smiled at each other.

Then he had gone away, and from that time on he had made no effort to see her alone. She had fancied that he had been rather more often absent than was usual; she had known that there was no fancy about the kindliness and tact and gentleness with which he made her feel entirely at her ease with him.

These qualities, in the supposedly undeveloped and insensitive Stan, had baffled Margaret more often than they had pleased her. She had tried in vain to recover her old impression of him; a polo and golf playing idler, spoiled by women, too sure of himself, a "pampered poodle." It had been oddly disturbing to her self-esteem to have this particular man showing delicacy and consideration, and a real appreciation of her position and her feelings. It was for her, and not for him, she had felt, to decide just how distant and how guarded

their relationship should be; he had baffled her by assuming the initiative.

Margaret had wondered at the weakness in herself that had made it hard for her to accept his adjustment of the intimacy between them. Forces within her, asleep for years, were awakened again now, and she had fluctuated miserably between reluctant admiration and affection for Stan, and the unconcerned indulgent contempt she had so wished to feel. She had grown nervous and tired, and had been continually in a state of excitement and restlessness.

One day one of the maids had asked her to step into Mr. Crittenden's room, to see about the arrangements for the paperers next week. Margaret had not been there for weeks; there was rarely occasion for her being there.

But on this day, as she had realized with a faint and unpleasant shock, it had been thrilling to find herself touching his books, looking at his pictures, handling his belongings generally. She had carried a camera and his golf-sticks into the dressing-room; that was his pongee wrapper; beyond were the shower, and the sponges and talcums and brushes he flung about the bathroom so untidily every morning.

While she had been there, he had come flying in unexpectedly; he had wanted the old racket that had been restrung. Margaret had been decorously stacking books; he had interrupted her. She had given him the racket, and had stood discussing the subject of his temporary move to other quarters. Would he tell Foote tomorrow about such clothes as he needed?

Stanley, thumbing the racket, had answered abstractedly. Presently he looked up with his friendly smile.

"They made a good job of that!" he had said, in satisfaction.

Margaret had been furious to feel her heart begin to pound, and her senses to swim. Standing here in the pleasant airiness of his big room, with the summer sunlight tempered

by drawn shades, and Carrie unobtrusively carrying away photographs, it had been maddening suddenly to lose the thread of the conversation, suddenly to feel herself become irrationally shaken and weak.

"I—what did you say?" she had stammered, flushing darkly as she looked at him.

Instead of answering her with a casual and bright repetition, as he might have done, as she supposed he would, and heartily wished him to do, Stanley had in turn flushed a little, and had looked at her with a quizzical grin, himself somewhat at a loss, without knowing why.

"What—what is it? Everything all right?" he had asked uncertainly. The tone, as Margaret had felt with a sort of desperation, once more touched the transition ground between calm and quiet conversation, and the stormy emotional heights she so feared and hated.

"Isn't everything always all right—for you?" Margaret, quite without her own volition, had heard herself saying. A faint stress on the last syllable had made Stanley's expression darken resentfully, and he had said quickly, but with his usual smile,

"Well, if everything isn't all right for *you*, Margaret—sometime when I'm not so rushed—Ed Rivers is waiting for me!—why can't we talk it over, and try to straighten it out?"

The words, with their hint of annoyance and impatience, had made the hot blood come stinging into Margaret's face.

"I didn't mean——" she had begun awkwardly. "Everything is perfectly all right!" she had added coldly, beginning again. And when Stan, with a nod, had left the room, she had stood still, her heart in an uproar of shame and anger. "He thinks I—he thinks I am trying to make myself interesting!" she had said to herself, half a dozen times. And finally, forcing herself once more to resume the dismantling of the shelves and tables with Carrie, she had added, in simple wonderment, to some imaginary confidante: "Now will you

please tell me what *possesses* me, whenever that man is around? He thinks—he must think I'm crazy! Maybe I am. What a fool—what an absolute *fool* he must think I am!"

And that evening, and for several days thereafter, she had been frigid to the point of absolute rudeness with Stan, telling herself that she was glad to convince him that she was the moodiest girl he had ever seen in his life. Certainly his own manner had assumed a stiffness and uneasiness that had made the occasional moments that they had spent alone together equally uncomfortable and unprofitable to them both.

About a week after the Strawberry Fête Mrs. Theobald came to the Country Club. Again she was exquisitely dressed, and again irreproachably chaperoned. This time she was with the Wainwrights, the most conservative members of the old guard.

She remained only a few minutes; stopped to speak to one or two plainly unresponsive old friends, nodded to a dozen more, fell into an undertoned conversation with her sister, Cora Pond, who was nervously playing a bridge hand, and sauntered down the steps from the porch with young Bill Spears. The Calverts unmistakably cut her direct, Mrs. Wylie unquestionably pretended not to see her, and young Harry and Beatrice Castleman, Elise de Vilbiss's cousins, deliberately turned their backs and walked away from her, with Gertrude Galvin and Willis Hyde-Brown. But Shirley carried her head high, her manner was unruffled and sweet as ever, and she had the satisfaction of snubbing poor little Mrs. Fenn, who seized this moment to effusively invite Mrs. Theobald to dine with them some night.

"Who are the Fenns? I never heard of them!" Shirley said negligently to Bill Spears. Bill, who had noticed nothing, said they had scads of money, and were trying to get in. "Disgusting!" Shirley commented simply. She dismissed Bill when she saw the little Cutting boy walking along with

Miss Yorke, and Jim put a warm little hand in hers, and Margaret smiled at her.

"We're walking home to lunch, for the good of our souls," said Margaret. "Jim and I ride too much, and Jim wants to be an athlete some day——"

"To swim like Stan!" said Jim manfully.

"I wonder how Stan felt about Mrs. Cutting adopting this child?" Shirley asked, with a glance downward at Jim, but with no sign of having heard him.

"He seems very fond of him," Margaret answered coldly. She had the child-lover's dislike for persons who ignored children.

"I daresay! He'll only do him out of about half a million!" Shirley said laughing. "Where did Aunt Hat—I always used to call her that, I suppose she'd bite me now, if I tried it!—Where did she get him?"

"Through Mr. Trowbridge, the New York lawyer, I believe. She had had him three months when I came to California."

"Trowbridge! I know that old tight-wad," Shirley said with a frown. "All Cuyler's business goes through him, and a nice time we had with him! By the way, do you play bridge?"

"Yes," Margaret said, no longer surprised at the casual way with which Cuyler Theobald could be mentioned by this woman who had been his wife, but shaken by her own thoughts, nevertheless.

"And are Stanley and his aunt going to the Murray party tonight?"

"I think—I know they are."

"But you're not?"

Margaret laughed.

"In our part of Ireland you wait until you're axed!" she said, not unwilling to show a little inclination toward friendliness in her turn.

"Couldn't you come down and have dinner with me?" Shirley said. "Mrs. de Vilbiss is coming, and an old friend—a man who happens to be here from New York."

Margaret suspected that the card-table must be filled, it mattered little by whom, but still it seemed to her charming in Shirley to think of Mrs. Cutting's companion, and she answered with a smile that took all possible sting from her words:

"I'd love to. But perhaps I had better speak to Mrs. Cutting first——?"

"By all means, but you don't have to!" Shirley assured her good-humoredly. "She'd have a hard time, my dear, replacing *you*. I asked Elise de Vilbiss how it happened *she* hadn't kidnapped you—she's the loneliest soul in the world, you know, and always has been hunting for someone to keep her company! Hattie Cutting would let the baby go before she would you—so don't worry. But speak to her by all means, and then telephone me!"

When Margaret went in, Mrs. Cutting was lying down, and Margaret found the simple matter of the Theobald invitation unexpectedly awkward to introduce. She went into her employer's room, as she was always privileged to do, and found her resting, with Carrie brushing her thin hair.

Margaret took her sewing-basket, sat down, and began a résumé of the day; what Jim had said, who had praised him, and how splendid an account of his baby French he had given to old Madame La Motte. Oh, yes, and Mrs. Theobald had been at the club.

"Anybody speak to her?" Mrs. Cutting asked, interestedly.

"I don't know, because I had Jimmie and the little Pope boy at the slides. But the Wainwrights brought her, and their maid told the Bishop chauffeur——" Margaret interrupted herself to laugh. "This is below-stairs gossip with a vengeance!" she said.

"Never mind—go on—what'd she say? I don't need you

any more, Carrie, thank you!" said Mrs. Cutting eagerly, shaking her head impatiently at the interruption.

"Well, she said that Mrs. Theobald had found the Wainwrights' dog, you know that champion bulldog they're so mad about; he'd run away, it seems," said Margaret, "and that Mrs. Theobald had said she was coming to the club and asked them if they would give her a lift!"

"Isn't that *exactly* like her!" breathed Mrs. Cutting, in a tone of triumph. "She probably stole the dog," she added, with deep amusement, and even surprise, at her own humor. And Margaret knew that the little joke would be told whenever the story was, and that women would ask each other mischievously if they had heard what Hat Cutting said about Shirley Theobald and the Wainwrights' dog.

Now was the time to repeat the invitation; Margaret introduced it casually. She had been asked to fill a bridge-table. She would be entirely willing to telephone Mrs. Theobald and say that Mrs. Cutting had given her something to do this evening.

But to her surprise Mrs. Cutting hesitated. No, she said finally, perhaps it would be a good idea for Miss Yorke to go, if she didn't mind. She implied that Shirley Theobald would be the talk of the hour, after all, and, since everyone would be thirsty for details concerning her, it might be as well to be the dispensers of these details. It was many a moon since the gossips in Burlingame had had so choice a tidbit as the return of this beautiful offender.

"Elise is simply making herself ridiculous about it," pursued Mrs. Cutting, eyeing her finger-nails thoughtfully. "She has the whole story: what Cuyler did, and how young Shirley was, when Tom Duncan bewitched her. I don't propose to be dictated to by Elise de Vilbiss, and yet I don't think there's any question but what it'll all blow over, and I'd as soon do it now as later. I don't like the girl—never did, but I shall ask her to my tea."

"She didn't seem at all upset to meet Mr. Crittenden at the tea the other day," Margaret suggested.

"Oh, that's all over!" his aunt said confidently. And after a moment she added, more thoughtfully, "That's—all over."

"I suppose so," Margaret conceded decorously. But her heart soared.

She felt the situation to be one of the strangest in her life, when she sat at Shirley Theobald's dinner table a few hours later. The little Ferguson house was an architectural jewel, and the room in which the meal was served, and the softly-lighted porch where they had their game, afterward, seemed to Margaret almost the loveliest she had ever seen. All about, in the darkness, were the sleeping gardens, and the fragrance of watered flowers moved through the starless night.

Mrs. Theobald wore a black lace dress, her hair, her complexion, her jewels, were perfection, under the lamps. She was a delightful hostess, merry and amusing, and long before the evening was over Margaret could forgive Elise de Vilbiss her capitulation, or indeed forgive anybody who found it easy to be kind to Shirley Theobald. The fourth member of the group was a handsome middle-aged man, who talked incessantly about the wonderful work his wife had done in the Red Cross during the war.

"Your face is familiar to me somehow, Miss Yorke," he said unexpectedly, during the deal. His fine smiling eyes were shrewdly fixed upon her; his dangling left hand caressed the ears of Shirley's police dog.

"Mine?" Margaret asked, flushing brightly over her soft dark skin.

"Yours. Do you know New York?"

"I lived there when I was a little girl."

"But not lately?"

"New York hasn't been my home for ten years."

"That's funny. You come from——?"

"From—the middle west."

"Ah, I don't know the middle west at all. My say, is it?" He considered his cards. "You passed, Mrs. Theobald. I say—by. H'm! That's very funny."

"Three hearts," Margaret said serenely. But Shirley noticed that her breath was coming quickly, and that her mouth was a little strained.

The two women parted at midnight with the air of old friends, and after that an odd indefinable relationship sprang up between them. Shirley, who was restless, lonely, and resourceless despite her gallant attempts to fill her time, longed for company, for an audience—any audience. She wanted, like a child, to "show off," to interest someone in her beauty, her affectations and accomplishments, and her dramatic situation.

Margaret knew that Mrs. Cutting's companion would not have been the brilliant Mrs. Theobald's choice; but with Shirley it was not a question of choice. She got into the habit of stopping Jim and Margaret in the roads, of luring them in to tea, even of coming across the little square lane behind the Wylies' garden and joining Margaret when she was gathering roses below the Cutting lawn.

Margaret, under her charming manner, found her, as she had expected to find her, a complete egotist; there was only one person in the world, to Shirley Theobald. She wanted to justify herself, to blame herself, to analyze and describe herself, to beautify herself. A flaw in her perfect skin would blot from her mind all other considerations while it lasted.

But she did this with unusual charm; perhaps some instinct of self-protection taught her to make this favorite topic charming to other persons. Margaret thought her nothing short of fascinating in the cold and calculating selfishness that was so perfumed, so prettily garbed, so wittily presented.

Among a hundred other triumphs, she told Margaret all about the long-ago affair with Stan, and Margaret winced

inwardly at the thought of Stan with Shirley in his arms, at the picture of Stan furnishing a home for Shirley.

"Fool that I was!" said Shirley frankly. "It would have been ideal, in every way. I would have been here, among my own people, we'd have had children! But——" And she sighed. "But there's always been a crazy streak in me," she admitted.

Of the elopement that was the real cause of society's censure she never spoke. Now and then she made some vague allusion to her "utter foolishness as a kid," or to the "things one will do rather than be bullied by a family of prigs," but to Tom Duncan she never alluded.

And she was really generous in many ways, really kind. Margaret was experienced enough to know that this sweetness and kindness must win in the end. Shirley loved to do pretty things, send tactful notes, embroider exquisite linen and give it away, stretch out her hand to anyone who was in trouble. Women friends in New York and Los Angeles wrote her affectionate and admiring letters: "Dearest old Shirley," "Shirley, you angel." Margaret analyzed her as being one of the women to whom sex, in life, is all-important; her own beauty and attractiveness appeared to Shirley as nothing more than weapons in the old game. Every man she met must want her.

For despite all her talk of giving up the thought of men and marriage, once and for all, her description of herself as a totally disillusioned woman, there was something primal, elemental, about Shirley, something that went much deeper than any little surface resolution she might make. She read love stories, she talked of love affairs, she measured every man she met simply as being a possible, or as not being a possible, admirer of herself, and even the jokes she told disgusted Margaret, not always by their coarseness, but by the extraordinary knowledge of the world's uglier side that they betrayed.

Sometimes, seeing her with Elise or her sister at the club, all daintiness, fragrance, exquisite pride and reserve, Margaret used to marvel that the shell could be so lovely and the woman within it so sophisticated, so cold, so calculating.

Stanley Crittenden, cutting across the little connecting lane that ran between the Wylies' and his aunt's gardens, chanced to meet Shirley at twilight, upon a certain hot evening in late August. It had perhaps seemed odd to him if he thought of it at all, that they did not meet more often: she was occasionally at the club, he knew, she was often wandering about the neighborhood that held both their homes. But except for the moment at the lawn fête, and an occasional nod and smile from a distance, they had not encountered each other.

They stood and chatted for a moment; Shirley raising that flowerlike, happy face of hers to his, her big dog springing about under the white hand she kept upon his collar.

"Come in and see me for a moment, Stan. I'm all alone!"

She opened her gate as she spoke, and behind her he saw prim hollyhocks, making a brilliant background of tissue-like pink flowers, and spread woolly blue-green leaves. The sunlight slanted brightly upon the flowers, the big dog, and the smiling girl.

"I—I oughtn't——" He did not really want to go in; Shirley did not particularly attract him, and he was going home to dinner. But he nodded, bent his tall head to go through the curved top of the gate, and followed her up a demurely bricked and planted back-yard and onto the deep, cool, orderly porch.

Shirley threw herself into a long chair, tossed aside her broad hat, and rang for something cool to drink. It was restful here, secluded and quiet, and Stan, comfortable in his own chair, heard a clock somewhere strike a silvery five and told himself that if he reached home—two hundred feet away—

even in an hour, he would still be earlier than they expected him.

But Mrs. Cutting's clocks had sounded seven before he came hurrying in; Margaret and she were dressed and waiting for him. They understood, they told him. Business was business, and his part of it was to entertain visiting lumber men, customers and business associates. It was all right.

And meanwhile—two hundred feet away—Shirley, who had flown upstairs to the mirror above her dressing-table and flashed up a score of lights, sat staring at herself as if she were bewitched, as indeed perhaps she was.

Her cheeks glowed, her eyes shone liquidly, her breath was coming quickly. She loved herself; this radiant woman of thirty who had lived so many delicious years of power over men!

After awhile she laughed aloud. Her colored woman, coming up with her dinner tray, smiled in sympathy, and Shirley caught her about her neck and kissed her, laughing again.

"Stan," she said to him a week later, when for a third time he had stopped on her porch for a talk, on his way home, "do you know that's an extremely pretty woman, Miss Yorke?"

"We don't think so," Stan answered smiling. And as Shirley looked up in pleased surprise, he added good-naturedly: "We think she's beautiful!"

"Well, I wouldn't say *that*," Shirley protested, somewhat taken aback. "No, but do you really think so, Stan?" she asked curiously.

"Well, I don't know," Stanley said, with an air of not treating the subject too seriously. Shirley was one of those restful women with whom all men know that no subject is serious; Shirley never wearied a guest with any effort to think. She repeated, she quoted, and asked innocuous little superficial questions; almost any man was a sage in Shirley's company. "Doesn't she seem so to you?" the man added, indifferently.

"Ye-es—I never thought of it. I suppose she is," Shirley conceded unwillingly. "In that sort of dark way," she added, thoughtfully and disparagingly. "Tell me about her!" she commanded.

"I don't know a thing about her," Stanley said. "She can mind her own business better than anyone I ever saw! She's clever, she manages everything, my aunt thrown in, with one hand. The kid adores her, and Aunt Hat does, too——"

He grinned, looked down at his drink, and finished it, leaving his sentence in the air. Shirley, an effective little figure against the gaily flowered cretonne of her big chair, looked at him sharply.

"Look out, Stan!" she said lightly.

"Oh, my dear——!" He shrugged, glanced up with a smile, and looked back at his clasped fingers, hanging between his knees.

"You know I'm not going to let anyone marry you, Stan!" Shirley said.

"I can assure you, my dear," Stanley said drily, "that Miss Yorke has no intention of changing her position! As a matter of fact, she doesn't like me—shuts right into her shell the minute I speak to her. She's rather a cold type, you know."

"No, but tell me!" Shirley said interestedly and eagerly. "Has she a suitor? She's such a close-mouthed creature! I'm dying to hear about her! Has she a beau?"

"She has had," Stan answered briefly. And with a grin he added, "She had—me."

Shirley was thunderstruck. Color came into her face, and she smiled incredulously; she would have been glad to think that Stan was not serious. She had not been at home for a month without realizing exactly what brilliant prospects she had thrown away, ten long years ago. Stan Crittenden, who was merely a rich man's grandson then, whom half-a-dozen Cutting children might easily displace as the heir, was a rich man himself now, and would be much richer some day. Shirley

had come back to find him the darling of the whole group, easily the handsomest, the most charming, the most conspicuous of all the unmarried men. Invitations to his ranch, where house-parties of the most delightful nature took place, were eagerly sought, there was not a girl among his acquaintances who would not have given up any other prospect for the favor of Stanley Crittenden.

Shirley knew him to be oddly simple, old-fashioned in his ideas of women, almost—by her standard, at least—a prude. No modern smoking, drinking girl would get him. But an experienced, devoted woman might. Shirley had before this made up her mind that he was well worth watching, well worth winning back to friendship at least, if no more.

It was therefore painfully disconcerting to have his own admission that all he had to offer had been already laid at the feet of Margaret Yorke. Shirley felt an impulse of actual hate toward the quiet, gipsy-eyed girl who could listen to another woman's confidences and chatter, and withhold this plum of her own.

"Stan, you don't mean it!" she said. "She—I wonder why she never told me?"

"I don't imagine she's the sort that would tell anybody," Stanley said quietly, and Shirley realized, with anger, that she had given him one more reason to admire Margaret.

"No, but tell me about it—tell me about it!" she coaxed him. Stanley shrugged.

"Nothing to tell, my dear. We had a house-party at the ranch, and she managed us all—the crowd, my aunt, the kid, the staff, it all went like clock-work. After it was over, I got to thinking that she was the whole thing, she'd made it so wonderful, and I went back and told her so, and asked her to let me make love to her. She—declined."

"Ah, well, she didn't think you meant marriage!" The man turned red, glanced up, glanced down again, and did not speak. Shirley hastily took to cover.

"In the name of heaven, *why?*" she asked, with a little apologetic laugh.

"Well, she had other plans, possibly."

"You mean she's engaged to somebody else?" Shirley asked, in relief.

"Oh, no, I don't imagine so. But isn't it conceivable that she doesn't like me?"

"No, it's not!" said Shirley, shortly and crossly, and Stan laughed outright at the childish anger in her tone.

"Don't tell her I mentioned this!"

"Oh, Stan—as if I would!"

They sat on in silence for a few minutes; Shirley thinking deeply. She had never thought of Margaret Yorke as a real person, much less as a rival, before. But Stan thought her beautiful; Stan had asked her, however casually and impulsively, to like him. Margaret's position was changed, where Shirley was concerned, once and for all. She began to think of Margaret's appearance: those dark, glowing women were a dangerous type. Her voice—her slender gipsy hand, Shirley remembered with misgivings.

"I wonder why she refused him?" she asked herself, a hundred times. And a hundred times she added, in her heart, "She'll never have another chance!"

CHAPTER VII

AFTER that she sometimes met Stanley in San Francisco for luncheon; a very simply managed matter, for it merely meant her telephoning him late in the morning that she had a trifling bit of business, or a troublesome letter, to manage. Gradually she took him into her heart of hearts, she talked to him of Cuyler, of her finances, of her alimony, and she reminded him in a thousand ways that on the twelfth of the coming October she would be free. Stanley came to know the perfumes she liked, the gowns she was planning, her different hats.

At first she would not lunch where anyone could see them; she said that the world had been too cruel to her already, it would be sure to misunderstand whatever she did. It was Stan who laughed at her, who finally persuaded her to join him openly at the St. Francis, where all the world lunched on Mondays, or at the Fairmont, where there was always wonderful music.

They murmured over their lunches, talking, talking, talking. Stanley reminded himself of her history, reminded himself that ten years ago she had talked, confided, laughed, in just this way. But her insidious charm began to win him in spite of himself; and he found that her constant invitations and her importunity made it unusual for him to live for twenty-four hours without at least a glimpse of Shirley. When he was with her he did not particularly admire her; he grew tired of her abuse of Cuyler and defence of herself, but something stronger than reason, his lazy good-nature and pliability, drew him back to her again and again.

One night, when he got home, he found that Margaret and his aunt had unexpectedly remained at the farm, to which they had taken Jim and a few small friends that morning, for an all-day party. Stan stood with a thoughtful face, considering the message. It was just six o'clock; he could telephone "Uplands" and be there in an hour.

He could run over and see Shirley for five minutes and still be at the farm for a half-past-seven dinner. Shirley had been cut to the heart, he knew, by being excluded from the Adamses' big dinner-party next week. The Adamses had known her abroad, and she had been of some service to them in Paris, and this was ingratitude of the blackest type. To make it worse, Elise had blandly accepted, even though she knew of the slight to Shirley. Elise was coming out of mourning in a few weeks, and she was becoming somewhat unmanageable.

Shirley had told Stan about all this with a gallant smile. It made his heart ache to think how decent she was about it, how far she was from blaming the Adamses, or Elise, or anyone else. Society could be pretty hard on a woman, thought Stan.

So he ran over, just to see her for a few minutes before he telephoned to "Uplands." She was alone.

Stan rushed back to the house at ten minutes past seven and dressed for dinner, and he and Shirley had it alone in the exquisite dining-room, before a snapping wood fire. The evening had turned foggy and cold, the garden was obliterated behind milky veils; there was not a leaf stirring in all the shrouded gardens and woods of Burlingame.

Shirley's dining-room was small, and panelled in blue-grey eucalyptus. The hearth was of blue-white tiles, wherein a hundred miniature fires crackled and blazed. At the windows, where on a bright morning exquisite pictures of gardens and brick walls and oaks were framed, the blue velvet curtains had been drawn tonight. Stan, contrasting the Italian

simplicity of the room with his aunt's crowded pictures and chairs, candlesticks and vases, thought it perfection. On the mantel were two slender candlesticks in old colored glass, and between them an old portrait of Shirley, in a fencing costume, with a red heart over her own heart, and a foil in her hands.

That was all; unless the Canton service and the Canton candlesticks and flower-bowls were decoration. Certainly Shirley was, in a wonderful and many-colored silk robe that wrapped about her exquisite little figure with all the careless grace of great art.

After dinner they went into the adjoining room, a room quite as beautiful in its own way, and shared another fire with their coffee and liqueurs. Shirley admitted now that she had been depressed all day; she was very silent, stretching a slender ankle and a silver slipper to the blaze, and drinking her coffee with half-shut, speculative eyes.

"Stan, I've often wondered——" she said presently. "I know how they all blamed me! A girl of nineteen—I seem a perfect baby to myself, now! But, I've often wondered—did you blame me?"

Stan, who had been sitting in some uneasiness of spirit, realizing just the power of this woman and this hour, and just his own foolhardiness in placing himself in this position under their spell, answered only with a laugh.

"No, but did you?" she persisted, a little hurt.

"Blame you? I don't remember, Shirley. I wasn't very old myself, you know, twenty-one or -two. A boy isn't much at that age. I—yes, I guess I was pretty well cut up."

The fire snapped, the air was soft and warm; Stanley was tired and willing to relax, to think of his own affairs. He should not have done this, he reflected. The afternoon call was enough; it was going too far, to return here for dinner. He would go home early, pleading fatigue, and get an early start to the ranch, with whatever men he could find to accompany him, tomorrow, which was Saturday.

He always felt uneasy, lately, with Shirley, in spite of his incessant desire for her company. It would be good to get to "Uplands" and find his aunt in the amiable, sleepy mood she always felt in the country, and Margaret her simple, self-contained self, busy with Jim, the puppies, the calves, the garden, the thousand interests she always found at the farm.

"Stan—" said Shirley, out of another silence—"I want to tell you something—I want to confess."

And to his slight disquiet, she came to a hassock at his knee, and sat upon it, one rounded warm arm laid across the wide arm of his chair, her beautiful body, in its thin silk draperies, curved to a crouching position, and her face turned toward him, although her eyes were averted.

"I want to tell you something," she said. "I was more of a fool than most girls, Stan, in some ways, and I was older than the girls I knew, in others. I'm not defending myself, but I grew up too quickly. I had an offer of marriage before I was fifteen, and two more before I was sixteen!"

"Kids," Stan suggested, trying to preserve a fatherly amusement at these revelations.

"Kids! One was Foster Priest—he was twenty!"

"And who were the others?" Stanley asked interestedly, for he had known her and all her circle then.

"Joe Pope and Blake Pond—afterward Blake married my sister Cora," she supplied promptly. Stanley laughed; it was amusing to hear all this, and he was quite sufficiently interested in women, as women, to enjoy this story of a woman's heart.

"Then you came along, my dear, and I adored you—except that I was always afraid of you! Oh, yes, I was," Shirley reiterated quickly, as Stan laughed incredulously. "And then we had the Randolph theatricals. You remember that Tom Duncan drilled us, and that I had the leading part? I know—I know—" she interrupted herself quickly, as Stan, at the

mention of Tom Duncan, made a mouth of distaste—"I didn't like him either, Stan! But he was enormously rich, you know, and he had that air of always having everything his own way. And I was nineteen. I always thought of him as an old man—he was forty-eight. He was twenty-nine years older than I—think of that!

"Well, anyway, he showed me that he admired me tremendously. I knew about his wife and children—I was mad about you—I didn't want Tom Duncan, never thought of such a thing! But Mama, who was buying my trousseau, you know, got into horrible money troubles, and you weren't a rich man, Stan," Shirley broke off to say pleadingly and prettily. "You hadn't anything, you know, and I suppose the various dressmakers and milliners knew it. Anyway, one day I cried and told Tom about it, and he gave me a thousand dollars in bills—imagine it! I'd never seen so much money in my life. I didn't give Mama all of it, you may be sure of that! Well, after that I liked him. And so, two weeks before our wedding —yours and mine—don't we seem the children, looking back?—two weeks before, when I was all excited and tired anyway, he came to me suddenly——"

She paused. Stanley, who was looking down at his locked hands, did not look up. The selfishness, the shallowness, the greed, had been her mother's before her, he reflected. Poor little nineteen-year-old Shirley, she had grasped life as best she could.

"He came to me," she went on, "and I honestly think he mesmerized me, Stan! He said I was to leave with him for the east, next day, and he gave me tickets—I simply obeyed him like a dummy. I remember moving about for a few hours as if I were in a dream, and going down to the Third Street station the next morning with my suit-case, and sitting in the train—and all the while thinking, 'Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this?'

"Well, the glamour didn't last long. He had promised to

put me on the stage, you know, and buy a big play for me—I remember he always said, 'A marvellous story, like "Outcast."' I didn't know anything about the way plays were bought, I believed he might launch me!

"He *did* give me money," she added thoughtfully, and something deep down inside Stan winced and revolted. "But what could I do with money—a child my age in a New York hotel? He used to laugh at the hats I bought; I had no friends. I cried myself sick—I cried for weeks, and that made him furious. Finally, he said we would go abroad, I never had been. And a few days later he was taken ill; we got a doctor and a nurse—they both thought I was his daughter. And he gave me a check for ten thousand dollars—it had just come in; I think he knew he was going to die and leave me, and his wife still refusing a divorce! So that was all of that.

"My mother came east, and we went to Europe—ugh! how I hated it. I kept remembering the glorious times my crowd was having here; Elise marrying millions, and all the dances, and all that! I used to want to kill myself, I don't know why I didn't. Marian Adams came over there, you know, after her divorce, and I lived with her, and then I stayed with the Potters' mother, when they had to come back—oh, how bitterly unhappy I was!

"I met Cuyler Theobald in Italy—he had been getting a divorce in France. He was a sport, Stan, a heavy eater and drinker and gambler, but he was handsome, and he liked me from the start. I married him to try to make a success of my life, and his, if it was possible. I really did try! I met his friends, I wore the clothes he liked, I took care of him when he couldn't stand——

"It wasn't possible! I had almost four years of it, Stan—four years in hell. And then, suddenly, this spring, struggling and puzzling and fighting and worrying, suddenly it didn't seem to me worth while. I gave up! I told him I'd had enough—I couldn't stand any more. It seemed to me that if it took a

year—if it took me ten, to work my way back here where I belong, it was worth it! So I came home.

"I'm not going to try to convince most people that I'm not simply a bad woman, running away with one man, and then divorcing another. But you know better, and I *am* going to try to convince you. I want you to know that if ever a silly, blind girl paid for her folly, I am that girl! And the tragedy of it all is——

"The tragedy of it all is," finished Shirley, very low, "that I have come to see, Stan, what I threw away. Too late!"

The eyes with which she suddenly faced him were smiling, but there was a flash of tears on her lashes, and her mouth shook.

Then for a long time there was silence in the room.

"My dear girl," Stan said awkwardly, ending it, "I don't blame you, God knows, or any other woman who gets rid of a brute. You've had a rotten time. I only hope that things are going better with you, and that—that in time you'll feel as happy here as you ever did."

"And you'll be my friend, Stan?" she asked, with a little emotion.

"Well, of course. Don't be an ass!"

"Then that's all I ask!" Shirley said, with her April smile. But she did not move from his knee; she turned to face the fire, her body bowed, her hands linked in the soft silky sweep of her gown. Stanley wondered if he could not now rise and say his good-nights.

"I am wondering," said Shirley, "if I can't help you, Stan. I'm older than Miss Yorke, and I think she likes me. I don't think anything in the world would make me so happy now as to feel that your happiness was safe. Sometime, when it's just the family going to the farm, persuade Mrs. Cutting to let me come, and I'll see how the land lies!"

"My dear, there is nothing doing there!" Stanley said, laughing. "I don't know which was the most surprised at

my making a pass at her—she or myself! Since then she hasn't said a word to me. She's a strange girl—mysterious, somehow. And she has a genius for making me feel an absolute fool!"

"Has she ever been married, Stan?" Shirley asked, presently.

"Why, I don't think so!" he answered, looking up in a little surprise and distaste.

"She's exactly the type to be supporting a good-for-nothing man somewhere," Shirley said shrewdly.

"I don't believe it," Stanley said firmly, partly because he did not wish to believe it, and partly because he was hurt by Shirley's half-contemptuous, half-amused summary of Margaret's character.

"Well, it doesn't matter!" Shirley laughed. "Because I am going to be your little fairy-godmother and dance at your wedding. Shall you like me for a fairy-godmother, Stan?"

The words were silly, even to some secondary consciousness that Stan had, but Shirley said them so softly, and with so winning an expression upon her young and lovely little face, that he found himself oddly touched.

"I—I think I will!" he said a little gruffly, smiling.

"Most as much as you did before?" she whispered.

"Maybe!" Stan admitted boyishly.

Shirley's brown eyes, fixed upon his, and very close to them, filled slowly with tears. She was still smiling, and the dazzle of her childish gaze through the shower was strangely appealing and pitiful.

"Thanks, Tanny!" she said softly, her lips trembling. He remembered that she had called him Tanny years before, when he had hoped to make her his wife. She had been a beautiful, doll-like child then; it seemed to him she was even more attractive now; suffering and humiliation had developed her.

Immediately she rose, went to the chair opposite, and began to talk in her usual animated vein. She was going to town

the next day, and was to lunch with Elise at the Town and Country. But how about tea, at five? Their usual table at the Palace, and their usual talk?

"I shall feel so differently, after awhile, Stan. But just now it's horrid. After October twelfth—oh, blessed day!—I shall be free. Free from Cuyler Theobald, after four years! That's *over*. I wish," she added frankly, "that I didn't have to touch his money! I only asked two thousand a month, you know, that's less than a fifth of what we used to spend. But even that," said Shirley, smiling, "hurts me!"

"I wish you needn't," Stanley concurred, briefly. It was one of the speeches that jarred.

"But where would my poor little hundreds be, all by their little selves?" the women asked whimsically. "I've come back to reëstablish myself, Stan. And you can only do that by forcing yourself down people's throats. I knew that if I took this place, and brought my car and my maids, they'd all take me much more seriously—and they *have*. The least—the *least* that Cuyler Theobald can do for me is give me a fresh start! Don't you think so, Stan?"

She was very feminine, very soft and appealing and young, under the mellow lamplight, and Stanley, watching her smilingly, found it hard to judge her dispassionately. A woman divorced, or with a divorce pending, was at a terrible disadvantage, anyway, he thought. Shirley would find new moorings, one of these days, and have the background, the establishment, the dignity without which a woman of her type is lost. She was at a sort of crossroads now; she belonged nowhere in the social scheme, she was an outlaw. But she was clever, where her own safety was concerned, and she would win.

The half-hour after ten struck; Stanley rose. He had to go, he said, instinctively stifling an impulse to add that it was to the ranch. She would be quite capable of suggesting, as an adventure, that she accompany him.

"Don't forget," she said, coming close to him for farewells, and laying her white little hand against his coat-lapel, "don't forget that I'm to be asked down to 'Uplands' one of these days!"

"You know you're in Aunt Hat's black books, Shirley!" Stan reminded her, smiling tolerantly.

"Yes, but aren't you master there?" she asked, saucily. "It seems to me I would be, in your place!"

"Oh, you would, would you? You could run the whole place with one finger, couldn't you?" Stan asked, looking down at the fluffy golden head, and the twinkling jewels in her ears and about her throat.

"And you included!" she answered, with a demure upward sweep of her lashes. "Don't forget—when you're married to your quiet, dignified, cool-blooded Margaret," she added, naughtily, "that bad little loving Shirley is your fairy-godmother! Kiss me, Stan!"

"Why not?" he said laughing. He put his arm about her, and she quite readily raised her soft, childish little mouth.

Instantly the whole soft, fragrant little body was limp in his arms; her complete surrender, here at night in the softly-lighted, empty house, amused Stanley, and it was with a sense of his own danger, and with a little contempt that he freed her, freed himself, and repeated his good-nights.

Ten minutes later the roadster was flying down the empty road, in cold clear autumn moonlight, toward the ranch. The dark orchards rushed by him, the cross-roads glimmered whitely across them, at sharp angles. Stanley drew great breaths of the soft, cool air, shaking his head now and then with the gesture of a dog shaking off water.

"Whew-w!" he said more than once, aloud. "I wonder why I let myself in for that? Whew-w!"

CHAPTER VIII

MORNING broke cloudless and warm at "Uplands." Stanley, awakening at eight and lying in bed, could hear the sounds he loved all about him. Cattle were lowing, far down at the barns, and there was the incessant brazen "blaa-blaa-blaa" of young calves. A motor-engine started at the garage, and was still; the windmill moved and creaked lazily in a warm breeze, and he heard the splash of water.

Fragrance poured in from the garden; all the homely border flowers were thick with sturdy bloom, and the roses were having a second season. In the damp dewy shadows of the big trees birds were flirting and darting, and there was even the prohibited "tuck-tuck!" of a motherly hen, who had worked her brood cautiously about from the kitchen yard.

Presently voices were added.

"Jimmie, don't chase her! Just follow her slowly, dear. If you chase her——"

"Go on, ole hen—go back, ole hen!" This from Jimmie, in a breathless and laughing shout.

"But, sweetheart, you'll frighten the little chickens, and you'll wake Uncle Stan!" Margaret was talking cautiously; the next sound was of a kiss. "Shall we open the gate and just follow them gently—*gently*—through it?" Stan heard her say.

Jimmie assented riotously. He was evidently in her arms, or she was kneeling beside him, because she next began, in a tone not much removed from the motherly "tuck-tuck" of the hen.

"Your button's gone again, dear—your new bathing suit, too!—and you're all pulled about. Stand still one second, don't twist that way, my darling. Now give Margar a kiss and say, 'I love my Margar!'"

Jimmie having complied with this not too difficult request, the voices and footsteps went away out of hearing. But Stan was aroused now by the allusion to a bathing suit. If Jim were in his, then undoubtedly Margaret was in hers, and they were going to swim. He got into his own, and his wrapper, and followed them to the pool.

The path wound under trees and between flower-beds; all delicious and dewy still, in the exquisite cool of the morning. The sun had not yet risen high enough to top Deer Hill, and the long shadows lay across grass and bushes still grey with dew. But the day would be still and burning hot. They were already in the water, Stan knew, for he heard Jim's shout echoed with that pleasant resonance that only water gives to human voices.

He reached the opening in the woods just in time to see Margaret dive like a seal from the spring-board, her black slender body cleaving the water cleanly, and her bright laugh breaking forth as her head reappeared in a splash of clear blue water ten feet up the pool. The morning was intoxicating, the water clear, the tree shadows mellow, and the sunshine already warming and heartening everything, up here above the hill.

Stan plunged after her, they swam about the pool with glorious swift flings of their arms and rapid twisting of heads. Presently both were panting beside Jim, in the shallows, laughing, breathless, exhilarated.

A swimming lesson to the small boy followed, Stan and Margaret sharing the responsibility of towing him out into deep water and encouraging him to trust himself to the inflated inner tire-tube that served him for swimming wings. Jim shouted, plunged, gagged, wept and laughed again.

"Fancy, he's only four!" Margaret said proudly. "He's going to make a magnificent swimmer!"

"Where did *you* learn?" Stanley asked, delighted to find her in a happy and friendly mood.

"In Nassau," she answered unreflectingly. And instantly he knew that she regretted the admission. "I had been working too hard," she said, "and I—I was there for three months. I didn't think," she added, hurriedly and nervously, "that one could learn to swim after childhood, you know! But I was nineteen, and I did learn! And oh, how I *loved* it—loved that glorious water!" she added.

Her voice stopped suddenly. She began to tousle Jim's hair with the big towel that had been warming in the sun and spoke to him inconsequentially and hastily, obviously anxious, Stan saw, not to follow up some significance in the admission. But of what? He plunged back into the water, and Margaret had dexterously changed the dripping little swimmer into a warm, dry, hungry little boy before Stanley came back.

"Now, you lace your boots, Dimski," Margaret said, with one more kiss upon the damp back of the child's little neck, "and we'll take another swim and then go in to breakfast!"

And she and Stan were off again, plunging, diving, splashing, circling in the delicious freedom of the water.

"You get on the edge, that side, and I will this," she directed him, "and we'll both dive, and swim underneath until we meet, and then come up together! Didn't you ever do that? It's wonderful!"

Stanley duly went in, at her signal, and swam along in the translucent green shadows and lights, looking sharply for her. Only a few instants, and then he saw the moving shapeless blackness ahead, and the dark face streaming with water, with wide smiling eyes gleaming even in the heart of the pool. They came up close together, hands gripped, and shouting with laughter.

"Oh, I love that!" Stanley cried. "Come on—let's do that again! That's glorious!"

And again, in the dapple of white and pale green and deep blue shadows, they met, and their hands met, and they rose dripping and breathless and shouting.

Then Margaret said that they must go in, and they walked down the pathway again, to the house, between the borders of stock and gillies and wallflowers, blazing zinnias and cornflowers.

"It's going to be boiling!" Margaret said, as the developing heat of the day struck them.

"I suppose——" Stanley said reflectively, irrelevantly, when Jim had run ahead to Nora and breakfast—"I suppose that there is good reason for mystery?"

Her face flushed over its exquisite dusky pallor, but she tried to laugh.

"Women love to make themselves mysterious, you know!" she assured him lightly. The fencing was deliberate; Stan felt rebuffed. She did not want to talk about herself. He thought of Shirley, the eager, angry self-defence with which Shirley was always so ready. Cuyler was selfish, Tom Duncan had been a liar, Shirley had been young and ignorant, Mama had been to blame—everyone had been to blame——

"I don't want to urge you, of course," he said, shrugging.

Margaret's dark blue eyes met his gravely, composedly; she did not speak. For a moment they walked on in silence.

"There is a reason," she said presently, biting back the "Stan" that annoyed her with its desire for utterance. "I can't tell you—or anybody. I *could* tell you that I don't think I was *all* wrong—things—other persons——

"No, but I was stupid, and wrong, too," she interrupted herself bravely. "To tell—even you!—would be to lose everything—everything I've worked to gain. I want to tell you," she broke off, suddenly, "because I want your—respect. But I can't."

"A promise?" he hazarded. Her drying hair was already beginning to curl upon her brown smooth shoulders.

"A solemn promise," she answered briefly.

"As for my respect," Stan said, grinning, "that you know you have—and more, too."

"That is all I can have!" she answered, quickly and uneasily. "And more—more than I ever thought life would give me, again."

"You've not done anything wrong, Margaret, I know that," Stanley said, affectionately reassuring.

"I didn't *think* it was wrong!" she answered, with a look straight into his eyes.

"It was a man?" Stanley asked.

By way of answer she nodded, after a pause, and with a great sigh.

"And you loved him?" the man asked, almost without being conscious that he asked it.

"I gave him—everything I had to give," Margaret answered very low, her eyes upon the blossoming yellow marguerites against which her thin, beautiful brown hand was resting. "I've wanted you to know—you've been thinking me everything that is—innocent, and young. I'm not—a girl. I've suffered—I've borne—everything a woman can!" she said.

Stan was silent; stupefied with surprise and an unexpected pain. Margaret gave him a fleeting troubled look and, twisting a plucked daisy in her fingers, went slowly down the path and into the house.

When they met again at breakfast, Mrs. Cutting and one or two of the women friends she had persuaded to remain at "Uplands" were between them. Margaret was lovely in a dark soft flowered gown in dull blue and brown; it was almost transparent, it was limp and soft, and seemed just fitted to the heat and brilliance of the day. Her dark hair, still damp,

was smooth; she looked cool and sweet. Jim, who usually came in for tastes of the grown-ups' breakfast, after his own, was pushing his curly head against her arm like a puppy.

He might have known that she was not a girl, Stan thought, drawn nearer to her by her confession than he had ever been. He might have known that there had been tragic hours in the life that had given that beautiful mouth its disciplined lines, that there had been love and passion back of the voice that had so poignantly human a note. Her attitude toward Jim—that was not the way girls of twenty-four usually felt toward children! This girl had been hurt, crushed, cruelly used, hammered into thankfulness for mere peace, for mere usefulness, for the love of a mere child.

What sort was the man? he wondered. A beast that she was supporting? Her husband, less than her husband? Was it blackmail that was keeping her so quiet here? Stanley, under his cheerful conversation, his concern with coffee and rolls, wondered what power a man had used to break down the reserve, the dignity, of such a girl?

After breakfast it was arranged by Jim that while Nora and Carrie made beds, he and his Margar should drive with Uncle Stan to the lower gate and come back in the farm truck, when the truck came up at ten o'clock. Accordingly Margaret packed herself and the child expertly into the roadster, and Stan drove them away.

He seized this opportunity to say to her suddenly:

"Don't forget that you're to tell me, when you feel like it."

He had hoped for a moment of softness, for a look at the dark blue eyes, for perhaps a faltering word of explanation of her morning revelations. But he was disappointed.

Margaret looked at him calmly, good-humoredly. There was no flutter of indecision or emotion about her.

"I shall never be free," she said, quickly. "There are circumstances—there are conditions——" She paused.

"The happiness of the person I love best in the world,"

she began again definitely, "depends upon my living here, as I am, and attempting to make no life of my own. That is the condition upon which—I live. My—position is not ordinary, I am tied by no ordinary—conditions. I can't explain it; it just—*is*. If I could ever feel that I might thank you—that I *might* show you——"

Her voice shook suddenly, and he could see by her quick rise of color that she was angry at her own weakness.

"But that will *never* be," she said. "The situation isn't of my making! I'm grateful to you for sympathizing! But that's all."

Stanley did not speak again, nor did she, until they had reached the big wooden gates that gave upon the highway. Then she and Jim jumped out and waved him farewells.

He left them starting up across the burned brown meadows; Jim valiantly shooing ahead of him the lazy cows that moved languidly in the grassy shadow of the oaks. Still, sweet warmth lay over the rising hills and the wooded canyons; larks whirled up with giddy bursts of song, crickets were already shrilling, and the air was scented with tarweed and ripening fruit.

Margaret, in her filmy dark gown and wide shady hat, was gathering great spears of bronze-brown yarrow when he lost sight of her. The child, a pink blur in the brightness, rollicked beside her; their shadows lay across the brown grass only a shade darker than itself. There would not be much shadow anywhere, today; the ring of far encircling mountains already had taken on its transparent mid-day blueness, in the long stretches of the heavily-fruited Santa Clara valley not a leaf moved. Prunes were ripening, and covering the dry rough earth under the orchards with purple circles; trucks loaded with boxed apples, peaches, corn, rumbled by.

Stan dreaded the city; this would be one of San Francisco's rare hot days, stifling and still. Usually a cool wind sprang up in the afternoons, all summer long, but there would be no

wind today. He hated the noise of it, the jaded men and women, the hot shadows of the buildings, the long hours. He had doubts of being able to get back to the ranch tonight until after dinner; he hated to leave its peaceful warmth and fragrance, and the shimmering green pool in the tree shadows.

Suddenly he remembered his engagement with Shirley; that would come after his office hours, and before a six o'clock business appointment. He had no real illusions about Shirley. But in spite of himself he looked forward, all through the long tiring day, to that little oasis in the big dim tea-room, to the thought of her fragrance and beauty, her laughter and her flattery.

She was awaiting him, punctual to the second, and she gave him immediately the pleasant sense of being important in her scheme of things. Her bright brown eyes shone at him from under a beautiful hat; when they were seated she pulled off her gloves and gave him a quick touch of a satin-smooth white hand, and another greeting: "Well, isn't this fun?"

The tea-room was full of friends and acquaintances, and all these, because of her companion, were careful to bow to pretty Mrs. Theobald. Stan saw it, and was enough the primitive male to enjoy the sense of protecting her, of championing her. This beautifully-gowned, self-possessed little woman was making a gallant fight, he thought.

It amused him, and it seemed to add a sort of glamour, a romantic quiver, to their conventional, friendly meeting, when he remembered that he had kissed her good-night, in her own drawing-room, the night before, that this chattering, aloof little beauty had been that other woman, too, of the silken draperies and the clinging arms.

When she got up, to cross the room and speak to Dollie McVeagh, who was getting her own divorce, and so could not be too particular about her associates, Stan watched her with a little reluctant admiration in his heart. She was a wonder—Shirley.

So she wanted him back again? he mused. The nerve—the sheer unmitigated nerve of it! He could contemplate her little maneuvers without conceit, and without any particular blame of the small craft that was so desperately seeking a safe harbor from perilous seas. But the gall of her!

Stanley had no objection to a little flirting, a little trifling. But Shirley Wilson Theobald need not fancy for an instant that her flatteries, her affectations, her innocent confidences were not all more clearly and openly obvious to Stan even than to herself!

He had a business appointment tonight, but Shirley had to be in the city until seven, too, it appeared, so they had a little simple dinner at Solari's, and he drove her home; later there was a game of bridge with two men who were delighted to come over from the club and play at Shirley's house, and Stan went home at midnight, without having had the dreaded minute alone with Shirley—and feeling oddly disappointed at the omission.

The next morning, Saturday, he telephoned his aunt at the farm. Mrs. Cutting immediately came to find Margaret, with a distressed face.

"Miss Yorke, Stanley's coming down at four. And—you'll have to have the upper cabin put in order—he's bringing Shirley Theobald with him!"

"Bringing Mrs. Theobald!" Margaret echoed blankly.

"Yes. He said she didn't feel very well, she wanted to go off and rest somewhere—he says he may have to go back, if they have a directors' meeting, and that she knows it, but that she just wants to rest! It sounds like her," said Mrs. Cutting bitterly. "I wish I had said that we were coming back today—I wish I had thought of it! I almost told him no —but how could I? He said, 'You've been so kind to her, Aunt Hattie, asking her to your tea, and all that!' I *hate* that woman!" finished Mrs. Cutting violently.

Margaret stood still, and all the sweet hot day darkened

and grew cold about her. She had been living in a dream since yesterday: a dream of the pool, the confidences, the look in Stanley's eyes and the tone of his voice. Now she was awakened.

"You don't suppose—" she began slowly, walking back beside Mrs. Cutting to the house, her basket only half-filled with grapes—"you don't suppose—after all he knows about her—that Mr. Crittenden could possibly——"

"I suspected it—I felt it all along!" Mrs. Cutting broke in miserably. "I had a premonition!"

Margaret's heart sank—sank.

"Suppose that he may be falling in love with her?" the older woman finished her question. "My dear, with a woman like Shirley Theobald, you may very safely suppose *anything!*"

CHAPTER IX

IN THE week that followed Margaret Yorke and Mrs. Cutting found use for every particle of patience, self-control and philosophy that they could muster. Shirley Theobald took complete possession of "Uplands," and everything that occurred there was arranged with reference to her comfort or desire.

It was still hot weather, the last of the glorious midsummer. Daylight lingered over the high mountain meadows and the long oak-dotted slopes until after seven o'clock, morning was before six; there were thirteen hours of warmth, of changing lights and shifting shadows, of perfumed airs and glowing flower-beds. The smooth surface of the pool was shattered three or four times a day by the bathers; there were the last of the great, bronzed, splitting apricots to gather, and the first of the white figs.

It might have been perfection! It might have been Heaven, Margaret thought, as she moved with an aching heart through the bright barriers of the flowers, and roused herself from bitter abstraction to answer the ecstatic Jim. The wonders of morning and evening, the far mountains as transparent at sunset as opal, the fogs that drifted away at dawn, revealing a world new-washed and windless in the softly deepening sunshine; these were all lost to her.

Margaret could not analyze what she felt; it was enough, after these years of numbness, that she should feel at all. To suffer heartache again, even for a cause undefined, was to frighten and distress herself deeply. She was like the man who, once having evaded blindness, recognizes the blurring and

dimming of his sight again with infinite apprehension, with despair. What did it matter to her, what did it matter to her, the girl asked herself angrily, what Stanley Crittenden did or did not do? She was nothing to the man—she almost disliked him!

Shirley began by being everything that was sweet, enthusiastic, appreciative. She was tired, she pleaded, she didn't want to interfere with anybody's plans, she just wanted to lie here in one of the great wicker chairs and rest.

For this resting she wore delightfully frilly, transparent lacy robes over frilly, delicate undergarments, transparent silk stockings in delicate colors, beautiful little slippers and mules. In her ringed hands, whose nails flashed like pink shells, was more delicate apparel; Shirley was making herself beautiful chemises and nightgowns, with medallions of lace and bands of creamy insertion. She would sometimes stand and hold these thoughtfully against her little person, measuring.

She did not swim, except perhaps once across the tank and back; to go under water wet her hair, she complained, gave her headaches. But every day she donned dazzling bathing-wear of cape and sleeveless jacket and flaring scarlet and yellow and blue trousers and a red cap, and basked in the shadow of the big striped red-and-tan umbrella, marking the dry cement with a wet little finger and murmuring to Stan. Stan, big and bronzed, would half-sit, half-lie, beside her, murmuring in return.

The effect of all this upon Margaret, in her plain suit and black cap, intent only upon diving, plunging, splashing, was to make her feel clumsy, stupid, in the way. After the first few hours, everything that Shirley said and did jarred upon her; she found herself responding heavily and with effort, her smiles hurt the actual muscles of her face, and her whole mental, moral, and spiritual being seemed to be metamorphosed into something unmanageable, irritable and strange.

Mrs. Cutting was at first in an equally uncomfortable state, with her own type of heartache and resentment. She told Margaret twenty times, on that first Saturday afternoon, that if Shirley Theobald was to stay at "Uplands" she herself would go home. She disliked the girl, and Stan must have known it!

However, by Sunday night, although she was still incessantly critical of Shirley, her position had slightly altered, as Margaret realized with one more pang of premonitory pain. After all, Shirley Wilson, or Duncan, or Theobald, was of Mrs. Cutting's circle. She knew the names, the relationships, the gossip of all their group; in Paris in the last five years she had seen scores of Californians and could supply her hostess with delightfully enlightening details concerning them. All the "Peggies" and "Vans" and "Bootsies" and "Reddies" were familiar to Shirley, and she was a clever gossip, knowing a great deal and making the most of everything.

Then she did play bridge well, and she and Mrs. Cutting and Stan made a good table, with young Beverly Berry, who turned up unexpectedly on Sunday with the obvious hope of being asked to spend the last of the college holidays at "Uplands," for a fourth. Margaret was supposed to cut in, but the very neighborhood of Stan and Shirley was so painful to her that instead she found important duties elsewhere and spared herself their company whenever she could.

She made no fight; she was once again her old, reserved, unresponsive self. But Jim, if he could have reported, or indeed if he could have noticed and appreciated, the moods she showed him when they were away in the woods together, might have opened their eyes. She would hold the little body tightly against her, as she sat brooding, brooding, brooding, on the fallen dry pale sickles of the eucalyptus, or on the heavy carpet of the redwood needles, and lay her dark head upon his staunch but uncomprehending little shoulder.

The baby arm would go about her protectingly, even

though Jim's eyes might be still intrigued by his turtle-colony, or the antics of the puppy. He would blindly hug the dark, proud head, dropped here in utter abandon of the pose that grew hourly harder and harder for her to maintain. And Margaret would draw great sobbing breaths, as if she could actually gain strength from the mere contact of the comforting, sturdy little form.

Sometimes, after one of these silent moments, he would bring her a gold and brown water-dog, or a turtle, to comfort her, or shove the always curling and burrowing puppy into her arms. And then Margaret would laugh deeply and almost hysterically, with the tears shining on her black, sopping lashes.

How could Stan be so blind—how could Stan be so blind! she and his aunt asked each other, asked themselves in their souls a hundred times a day. He was so big, so clean and simple and unspoiled; how *could* he think this pretty, selfish little egotist everything that was admirable and fine in woman?

Yet that he did think her so, they could not long doubt. Stan was at first a trifle apologetic at having brought her down to them with only a few hours' warning. But as Mrs. Cutting and Margaret rose to the situation, welcomed Shirley cordially, showed her a white, shaded bedroom full of tree shadows and bowls of flowers, set the bridge-table under the grape-arbor and drew her into the conversation, the conviction that he had done a wise and clever thing grew upon Stan.

His spirits rose; he had a plunge, changed into cool white, strolled about the farm as he loved to do, with Margaret and Jim, extolling the charms and the trials of his guest. They came back to find Shirley all laces, faintly-colored ribbons and exquisitely scalloped golden head, and diffusing a delicate odor of powders, toilet waters, perfumes.

Stan's mood rose to actual exhilaration. Perhaps he had

had some little misgivings as to Shirley's welcome, as they drove through hot Mayfield and Sunnyvale; perhaps he had been just a trifle surfeited with the curls and dimples and the saucy expressions of the red mouth.

But now everything was glorious; Aunt Hat liked her, and Miss Yorke liked her, and everything at "Uplands" was just what it ought to be! They cut for the deal; and he played with Shirley, four no trumps doubled, and a hundred for the extra trick, and rubber——

Shirley played well, and thought she played extremely well. She spread out the cards, after the sensational hand, and showed Margaret just why Margaret couldn't possibly have made her double. Margaret was but twenty-four, after all, and she was deeply and passionately in love, for the first time in all her life. She flushed childishly under Shirley's kindly superiority.

"I had the hearts, and the double reëntry," she reasoned.

"Yes, but you hadn't a double!" Shirley assured her, with the superiority of the person holding all the cards. "*Never* do that."

"She had a perfect double," said Mrs. Cutting briefly, dealing.

"Oh, no, she didn't, Aunt Hat, without the top of her suit. She knew Shirley was strong," Stan said argumentatively.

Margaret's heart burned; she felt hot, sick, furious. Her heart was thumping so that she missed her bid, and Mrs. Cutting was astounded when the seven spades were laid down, on a diamond make.

Margaret, as dummy, leaned back against her chair, her one desire to weep. She hated the detestable, loathly game, she hated the burning heat of the afternoon, she hated everything and everybody. By this time Shirley Theobald evidently thought she had a mere beginner with whom to deal; ah, well, let her think so! For Margaret meant to plead a headache and go to bed before dinner.

Mere generosity prevailed; she could not spoil their evening. She put on the limp, voile dress, and read Jim about the three little Blackamoors, and put yellow medicine upon a microscopic spot of poison-oak between his brown, scratched little fingers, and heard his prayers.

This was refreshing, and supper on the "old porch" was pleasant, too. Something of Margaret's native courage came back, and she determined to fight; Shirley should not have everything her own way. The twilight died away, while they lingered over peaches and coffee; Margaret made herself talk, and was rewarded by Stan's attention. Perhaps he suspected that there was a generous effort behind her words, and appreciated it. For suddenly Margaret found Stanley and herself leading the conversation, and, if he had never realized it before, she knew that he had reason to realize tonight that here was a true conversationalist: witty, easy, impersonal. Margaret knew she was in form. She had been in Washington as a little girl during a part of the war, they could discuss the League and the Treaty animatedly. Margaret knew of this man, yes, and knew of that one. And Stanley had been in the aviation camp, so near, all the time?

Mrs. Cutting listened complacently; she had been for more than ten years under the impression that Stan's magnificent action had appreciably hastened the peace. But Shirley was not interested. Only personalities interested her, personalities concerning her own circle, or the immensely rich persons of the world, even if she did not know them. She liked stories about diamonds, furs, divorces, yachts, extravagances of all sorts; politics, international relationships, civic or social problems did not exist for her.

They went back to the card-table; playing now under a luminous great oriental lantern. And tonight Margaret saw that the luck had shifted, and presently had the deep and secret satisfaction of seeing Shirley revoke.

Mrs. Cutting detected it, and sharply called attention to it

at the end of the game. Margaret said nothing, but Shirley of course burst into amazed protest. Even when the trick was spread she would hardly admit the charge, but Stan admitted it, and there was no kindly patronizing little instruction at the end of that hand, and Margaret was satisfied.

But it was a poor sort of satisfaction, after all, and as the next day went by, and the next, Margaret came to despise it, and to feel a sort of self-contempt for her own attitude that added appreciably to her unhappiness. After all, it didn't matter what she and Mrs. Cutting thought of Shirley if Stan liked her. And Stan more than liked her.

He was incessantly defending her; calling their attention to her childishness and her charm. Wasn't she cute in that big hat? Didn't Margaret admire her? Women liked to pretend that Shirley was a fool, because she was so pretty, but he, Stan, wanted them to know that she was one of the cleverest women he had ever known.

How could he do it? Margaret could only repeat contemptuously to herself. How *could* he believe and admire her, and ask them to believe and admire her, knowing what he knew, indeed feeling what he had felt and expressed about her only a few weeks ago? He was so sensible and so unimpressionable, usually, with women; far more charming, far sweeter and wiser women than Shirley Theobald had tried their arts on him in vain. He always understood them, he always gently rebuffed them, put them in their places with a sort of good-natured, brotherly kindness. He knew women liked him, and he knew that every calculating mother on the Peninsula had an eye on him. But he laid all this to his money; it did not spoil him, and quite placidly and good-humoredly he went upon his way, sending all the different girls wedding-presents in turn, sending them flowers when their babies came, liking now and then to remind a pretty matron or young mother of the sentimental past, when he and she had had an awful crush for a season—did she remember?

A hundred times, of late, Margaret had half-scornfully admired his poise, his boyish conviction that flirting was one of the legitimate joys of life. She did not admire Stan Crittenden, no, but, after all, he was a decent, friendly, and—supposedly—intelligent person. He had been kind to her, protective, generous. He had hinted at a real devotion, he had shown her, quite without knowing it, that when love came into his life, love and marriage and home-making, and even fatherhood, these would be sacred things. His attitude, in those too few hours when they two had been in sympathy, hours she could not remember now without a vague pain, had been one of almost old-fashioned reverence. It was to be no laughing matter of cocktails, bridge, cigarettes, recklessness and daring, the hour that gave him his wife.

But now this was all vanished. Physically he was the same; big, kind, merry, responsible Stan, with his white teeth always grinning, with the brown, capable hands, and the sleek mouse-colored hair. But except for that he was completely changed.

He was fitfully gay, too gay, feverishly eager always to have some plan afoot; telephoning other people to come down to "Uplands" and join them, or racing off with Shirley in the roadster to attend some party or dinner. And between these spasmodic times of hilarity, he was nervous, sensitive, silent. His look was always moving quickly about, as if he suspected pitfalls everywhere: in the conversation, in the domestic routine, in the day's plans. He answered his aunt with a veiled and restrained politeness worse than any abruptness, and he quarrelled openly with Hang and Battersby.

Shirley, having once inspected the farm, with her fair little face exquisitely lighted by orange light filtering through the taut transparent silk of her blue sunshade, felt that she had done her duty. Why do it again? Weren't troughs always troughs, and cows always cows? The little adventures, the interests and events of those happy, before-dinner expeditions were abandoned. Margaret and Jim usually went alone; and

Margaret tried to pretend that the whole thing had not somehow lost its salt. Stan did not come without Shirley, or if he did come, he was not like himself.

For Shirley's conversation he always had a quick, smiling attention, but he gave only an absent-minded, nervous sort of notice to what the others said. With Margaret he presently grew absolutely sharp.

"I wish you wouldn't always oppose my plans," he said, smiling patiently, on the Thursday morning that seemed to Margaret five months rather than only five days away from Saturday afternoon of Shirley's arrival.

"I'm not opposing your plans, Mr. Crittenden!" Margaret answered, stung. "The Riverses and the Cannons are coming down today, and that's why I told Carrie that we wouldn't want the box luncheon for Santa Cruz!"

"Oh!" Stanley said, ashamed. "Oh, I see. My fault. I'm sorry!"

Margaret, putting grasses and a mixture of gay field and garden blossoms into a glass bowl, did not answer. A lump came into her throat.

"I'm sorry, Margaret," Stanley said again, at her elbow, very low.

The look in her dark blue eyes, a pleading, a sorrowful look, shone through a sudden hot film of tears. He knew that it was excruciating to her to show emotion; that she would rather have suffered any other punishment than to have him see those eyes then, and those tears.

"What is it? Something wrong?" he asked with sudden tenderness in his voice. She had her secrets; life was not all simple and smooth for her. A vague picture of some brutal man in a far away city, some sordid little complication of her salary check and his rapacity, made him feel a pang of affection and loyalty for her. "You know you wouldn't let *me* help out!" he reminded her, with a little twisted grin.

"I don't think I asked for any sympathy!" Margaret said,

blind with unreasoning pain, and venting upon him her anger at herself.

"Now, look here—look here—look here!" Stanley warned her, in the kindly, amused tone he would have used to a petulant child. He took her hand away from the flowers, turned her toward him while he held her fingers tightly. He was amazed to find himself in this position, but he did not retreat. "Tell me what's wrong!" he said.

"Nothing at all!" Margaret said coldly, freeing herself. "He thinks I am simply a rude, ill-tempered beast!" she thought. "I can't help it—I don't care!"

"Don't be blue!" Stanley coaxed her, troubled and sympathetic. "Everything'll come out all right!"

"Please go away—I'm going to cry, I think," Margaret said quickly and warningly. Stanley after a moment's hesitation disappeared, and the girl, dizzy with feeling, went on blindly arranging her flowers; bachelor's-buttons and old-maid's-pincushions and love-in-a-mist, daisies yellow and white, and purple spears of larkspur; her thin, nervous brown hands fluffed the oats and flowered grasses dexterously. He was thinking her utterly callous—he was thinking her stubborn—she hated him! Of course he was not thinking of her at all——

She turned. He was gone. A sickness of spirit descended upon her and did not lift for the remainder of the day. She avoided Stanley's neighborhood; it was impossible to avoid Shirley, who was making herself lovely in lemon-colored lace and a straw-colored hat, to go with Stanley to the San Mateo Club, to get the Riverses and the Cannons and bring them back for lunch.

Stanley, going back to the porch, and oddly haunted by the memory of Margaret's slender, youthful figure, the brown hands busy among the flowers, had hinted that Margaret and Jim might like to go along. He did not admit it to himself, perhaps he hardly realized it, but hitherto he had been fre-

quently antagonized by some curious quality about Miss Yorke that made him always want to make a fool of himself. The girl was sure of herself, inaccessible, somehow.

But today she had been different. There had been something stirring and disarming about that forlorn: "Go away! I'm going to cry."

"Ask her if she'd like to go," his aunt, placidly buffing perfect nails, answered his suggestion.

Shirley looked from aunt to nephew with elevated brows and an odd little smile.

"I like to be decent to her," Stan explained.

"Decent to her!" Shirley offered lightly. "My dear, you're ridiculously good to her. By all means take her, if you like! But I thought Jimmie was in disgrace?"

Jimmie was indeed in disgrace; but Mrs. Cutting gave her guest a resentful look that it should have been remembered. Punishment for Jimmie was usually largely evaporated in the original court-martial. After that the family that adored him made it a point to forget the painful details as fast as possible.

"If they go I think I had better not go," Shirley further suggested pleasantly. Mrs. Cutting told herself contemptuously that she might have expected this. Now Shirley would be sweet, determined, cool. No, she had a slight headache. Oh, please don't make such a fuss! What did it matter, anyway? No, if Stan wanted Miss Yorke it was all right—quite all right. Of course! But one of them would have to sit in the back seat, and she hated to be bounced.

Stanley assumed so nervous, so contrite an expression that his aunt could gladly have slapped him. Shirley's displeasure was something he could not bear. He humiliated himself, he said silly and fatuous things, he laughed awkwardly and mirthlessly.

"Ah, when she puts her little lower lip out that way, she knows she's acting like a cute baby!" he teased.

"Please, Stan——" Shirley said coldly and haughtily.

"Was her horribly cross?" Stan persisted.

"I don't like you when you talk that way," Shirley murmured.

"I didn't hear you," Stan said, hanging over her.

"I——" Her pretty little mouth was set with a sort of babyish viciousness. She put up a shell-white hand and pushed him pettishly away. "I hate that way of talking!" she said, angrily.

"How shall I talk then?" He was enjoying the exchange and still treating her like a cross but engaging baby.

Margaret came to the porch doorway, pushing rather than escorting Jim, who was weeping loudly, with his bowed little head dripping from under a turban-like towel, and water falling upon his pongee wrapper. Jim's crime had been crawling into the old guinea-pig house and eating a week-old biscuit he had found there. Nora, whose horror of germs amounted to a disease in itself, had washed him and soaped him and scrubbed him with more vigor than tenderness; he had gotten soap in his nose, and under her violent rinsing water had gone down his throat, and under her running fire of blame bitter tears had burst from his afflicted eyes. Now his Margar had rescued him, and he was weeping more loudly than ever in his exquisite self-pity; every breath came on the convulsive hitching of sobs, he ha-ha-hadn't known dat wabbit biscuit was wong to eat—and he ha-ha-hadn't—eated but one bite——

Margaret nodded, all reassurance and amusement and sympathy, as Mrs. Cutting looked up in concern and distress, and Stan thought the girlish figure seemed touchingly big-sisterly and kind as she led the small offender down to the warm shade of the oaks, where she was later seen tousling the golden head into dryness and laying out a marvellous map of sticks and acorns.

"Heavens, what an uproar!" was all Shirley said. Sometimes she was really extremely nice with Jim, and told him

about her little nephew, Billy Pond, who had to go to a big hospital, and who had four nurses and three doctors. But Jim usually distressed her vaguely; she looked at him in bewilderment. In any emergency Jim would never have dreamed of whispering, warm and tickling, into her ear, as he did into Margaret's; on a stroll he would never have dreamed of putting his hand into hers, as into Margar's or Mummy's. The closest Shirley had come to an interest in him was when she told Margaret the address of a delightful place to get him his winter reefers in New York; an enormously rich friend of Shirley got all her boy's clothes there.

After the Jim episode, Shirley got up and sauntered away, and Stan sauntered after her, as his aunt had known he would, as Margaret had known he would. He was completely captivated; he could not longer talk sense or think sense where Shirley was concerned. Whatever else failed, he must be at peace with Shirley.

CHAPTER X

BOTH the women watching him knew that he was not happy. When he was happy Stan was very different. He was quiet, full of interest in everything, he was pleasant.

Now he was excited, vociferous, anxious to prove that he was having a wonderful time, anxious not to waste a minute, but not—no, not pleasant. Margaret had been able to talk to him quite simply and freely, a few weeks ago. Now she had to think before she spoke, select her subject, make sure that it would not offend. If it could possibly be construed into a reflection upon Shirley, then he was furious.

"You women are *rich!*" he said one day, in bitter sarcasm, to Margaret. "Always wishing that you had a chance to do some good in the world, and then when a poor girl that's down and out comes your way, you can't be civil to her!"

"I'm extremely sorry if I have been uncivil," Margaret had said, in anything but penitence, with an angry gleam in her eyes.

"That's the way women always act to women," Stan had generalized largely. "If it was a man, now, he could be a murderer! But it's a woman, and a pretty woman, and that's enough! All you can do is get together and knock her!"

"Men adore platitudes like that," Margaret had observed, mildly generalizing in her turn.

"This girl is up against it," Stanley had reasoned, with a resentful glint in his own grey eyes. "I offer her an—well, an asylum, for a few weeks. You and Aunt Hat are always blat-

ting about how you'd like to have my friends here, but the minute I take you at your word——"

"I certainly don't *blat*," Margaret had begun, childishly. "And I don't think your aunt——"

"Oh, Lord, that was just a *word!*" Stanley had interrupted, furiously. "You know what I mean. But by George, I'm done kicking about it," he had finished, angrily. And immediately he had gone off upon the theme again. He wanted to complain, reason, soliloquize only about Shirley, in these days. Lord, why couldn't they be decent to her?

Margaret, listening in a sort of icy patience, would think of Shirley, small, soft, silk-and-lace clad, dealing with the great facts of life as a child might deal with sticks of dynamite. Elopement, her position as the nineteen-year-old mistress of a man of fifty, ostracism, marriage, divorce, had still found Shirley soft, cuddly, wanting to be loved and petted, wanting to curl up by a fire, or under rose-vines, and tell other men how badly two men had treated her. She had never had a child, Margaret would think contemptuously, the babyish, innocent, helpless nature had been quite equal to avoiding *that* complication. But there had been frightful quarrels, when Tom Duncan or Cuyler Theobald had not been the only ones rendered idiotic by intoxication, there had been shrill squabbles over bills, jealousies and angers, there had been tears and resentments and reproaches, and then the beautiful pearls and diamonds Shirley wore had made their appearance, one by one, and she had been all cuddly dimples and babyish smiles again.

The world was full of women like that, Margaret would reflect bitterly and contemptuously. And it was the Stans, the big, fine, simple men, who believed in honor and chivalry, and who were incapable of petty selfishness and falseness themselves, who invariably were their prey.

"You don't understand her—she's not a bit what you think—underneath she's just a little girl!" was his argument

to anything his aunt might say. He was sure, sometimes buoyantly, sometimes nervously and angrily, that Shirley was being deliberately misjudged.

Why, what did they know of her, Margaret and his aunt, sitting back in dispassionate judgment? He had the living proof of her goodness and sweetness in her own words, those intoxicating words that she murmured to him under the sweet autumn moonlight, when the other women had gone indoors, and he and she were performing the little assumed duty of walking down to the big sycamore, to see if by any chance the roadway lights had been left burning.

Battersby always put the lights out scrupulously; never lighted them, indeed, unless there was company expected, but Stan and Shirley loved the pretense that gave them an excuse for being fifteen or twenty minutes alone every evening, and they made a great joke of their stroll down under the trees and had little phrases by which they could allude to it undetected, all day long.

Presently, after a successful house-party, they all went away; the Cannons, the Riverses, Shirley and Stan. Young Mrs. Rivers's mother had a beautiful bungalow at Pebble Beach, near Monterey, and it had been decided that they would all spend a few days there; Stan and the other men going into the city on the train any day, if it were necessary, and returning to the Beach at night.

A dreadful silence, a silence that seemed to Margaret like that of death, descended upon "Uplands" when the two big cars had gone. It seemed to both Margaret and Mrs. Cutting utterly unbelievable that Shirley's visit had been of less than a week; and that this whole complication had arisen and developed with such rapidity. The echoes of Shirley's high voice seemed still to be ringing upon the porch and lawn; Shirley's big shade hat still hung in the guest-room closet, and on the top of the bridge-pad were still scored the last games.

Less than a week. Margaret felt that she would have given years of life to go back to the unconscious confidence of a week ago. For both she and Mrs. Cutting felt that the cause was lost.

Stan's aunt had softened greatly toward her young companion, in this time. Margaret rarely saw the old snobbishness now, and now and then the formal name was altered to "Margaret," apparently almost without the speaker's consciousness.

"That's falling in love, Margaret!" the older woman said, with a sigh. "Poor Stan—poor Stan! If it could have been any other woman——"

"That can't be love!" Margaret said rebelliously. "It's *not.* If he loved her, really, she couldn't make him seem so strange and so nervous."

"Well, she'll marry him!" his aunt predicted, with another deep sigh.

"You don't think so?" Margaret's heart seemed to miss a beat.

"I don't think *he* thinks so," Mrs. Cutting conceded. "I don't think Stan is any more in love with her now than he ever was!"

"Oh, neither do I!" Margaret echoed fervently.

"But men don't marry women because they love them, my dear," said Harriet Cutting. "Half the married men in the world hadn't the faintest intention of getting into it. It's just that one thing leads to another: this little step is forced, and that is forced, and the first thing he knows, it's *done.* I think Shirley will land Stan if she possibly can—why shouldn't she? And since he can neither hear nor think at present, there's nothing we can do or say!"

Margaret, inwardly raging, longed to burst out into the denunciation of such weakness that was always on the tip of her tongue. But she was perforce silent, and a day or two later, deciding that all charm had departed, with Stan, from

"Uplands," Mrs. Cutting announced that they were to return to the Burlingame house.

Stanley was still at Pebble Beach, and Margaret tried not to think about him. But she was teased with premonitions, uneasy, apprehensive. He couldn't really be falling in love with Shirley Theobald—that ridiculous premise was based upon nothing! And yet the hours until Tuesday, when the house-party was to break up, seemed endless to Margaret.

She could hardly believe that it had once been her lot to see him casually and constantly, every day, several times a day. He had been nothing then, just Mrs. Cutting's spoiled and empty-headed and too-popular nephew. Now—well, now, he was still nothing to Margaret Yorke. And yet she hungered for the sight of that big, loosely-built figure in tweeds, and that bronzed, grinning face, she longed for the sound of his quick, definite step on the porch. Just to hear his voice saying, "Any mail, Foote?" would have somehow eased her fretted soul.

She and Jimmie, returning from a children's party at the Lakes' on Tuesday afternoon, passed the Ferguson house, and heard Shirley trilling at the piano. Margaret felt an instant relief; Shirley and Stan were not together at this particular instant, anyway, said her unreasonable heart.

But this emotion was destined to be short-lived. It was only an hour later, at about half-past six o'clock, that she came downstairs to the terrace to look for Jim's tiniest bear, a two-inch treasure that was daily lost and daily recovered. Mrs. Cutting was on the terrace, and as Margaret approached, Stanley and Shirley came up from the lower garden—up those same brick steps upon which Margaret had once groped for Stanley's hand in spring darkness.

The instant she saw them the girl knew the truth, and she had perhaps another three instants in which to rally what she could of pride and dignity. The mellow afternoon air turned sickly, brassy, in her mouth, as she stood still; she felt her

spine chill, and water sprang to the palms of her hands. But there was nothing for it now but courage.

What Shirley said she did not hear; Shirley fluttered to her knees beside Mrs. Cutting's chair, and Stan bent over them both with a look at once sheepish, defiant and appealing.

"She thinks she's made up her mind, Aunt Hat!" Margaret heard him say, with a sort of good-natured superiority. "I don't know how long she'll like me, but I think you're going to have a little niece along about the middle of November!"

"I'm sure I hope you'll be happy, dear boy!" poor Mrs. Cutting said feebly. Shirley was immediately upon her feet; she was brimming with sweetness and eagerness and vitality. She came to kiss Margaret, holding her by both hands afterward, and almost dancing as she talked.

"My dear, you must forgive me for running away with him, but the truth is—I've made a discovery!—he's just the sweetest and dearest fellow in the world, and long before I knew it myself, I was just head over heels! Was I terribly piggy, down there at the ranch? I didn't mean to be. But I'm going to make it up to you all—you see if I don't!"

She was promising favors already; she was estimating the possibilities of the old house with the frank delight of a child in a toy-shop. Her manner to the servants was gracious, conciliatory; this was her domain now, to be conquered and claimed.

They could not stay to dinner; nobody was to know, of course, but they had told Elise, and they were going there. Elise was going to give Shirley the jade and pearl necklace—the famous necklace, wasn't that wonderful of her? And then they might go over to the club, later: there was a dance tonight; and while of *course* the papers mustn't get this thing until Shirley was at least free, it was going to be great fun just to mystify a few people and to tell just one or two.

Margaret saw Stan help his promised wife into her loose

silk coat; her pretty brown eyes were raised to his, as he did so, with an expression of confidence, happiness and triumph that Margaret could not banish from her thoughts for hours.

She had to talk to Stanley's aunt; she had to manage dinner somehow. But at eight o'clock Mrs. Cutting, although expressing herself as utterly heartbroken and disgusted with life, went in next door to play cards, and then Margaret could go upstairs.

CHAPTER XI

SLOWLY, with a certain deliberation, she went to her room. She put down Belloc's "Marie Antoinette," she undressed, made herself comfortable in a thin silk wrapper, lighted her bedside light and extinguished the other lights, and then went, still with the same quiet, unhurried air, to the southwest window. There was a big chair here, and Margaret sat down in it and leaned her elbows upon the sill.

And now the agony of jealousy that she had held at a distance all evening came upon her in a full flood. Margaret's breast rose quickly, and she knotted her fingers, leaning back, and pressing them against the actual pain of her heart.

"Oh, it isn't right—it isn't right!" she whispered.

Silence again; and again she leaned on the sill.

The garden below her was flooded with bright hard moonlight; the night was almost too bright. There was something startling in the inky silhouettes of the trees, the swimming silvery spaces between them, the bright fretwork of leaf shadows under the arbor and in the rose terrace. Margaret looked up at the high dome of the sky, greyish green and cloudless, with the silver disk crossing it in harsh, unchallenged power. Frogs were shrilling—shrilling, were suddenly silent as the yellow lights of a motor wheeled and turned on the road, and suddenly began to shrill in concert again. The world was unfair, and disappointing, and tiresome. Margaret knew that she would not die, and she felt that she cared little about living.

To go downstairs tomorrow, and smile, and listen to

Shirley's plans, to share the exultation with which this radiant, triumphant woman would arrange the future, to hear about teas for Shirley, luncheons for Shirley, dances for Shirley—all the social machinery set in motion to approve and welcome Shirley, who was taking so sane and admirable a step at last—no, Margaret could not bear it, she could not bear it!

This was the reward of a decent woman, she meditated bitterly. This was what self-denial and dignity and purity accomplished, as against everything that Shirley Theobald represented in womanhood. Stanley knew what she was, he had known the Duncans, years ago, the quiet, pale, lifeless wife, and the three young sons, he had known the home from which Shirley, at nineteen, had taken the husband and father. And Cuyler Theobald, sodden with drink, his intellect that of a dull boy of fourteen, without intelligence, without interests, without God, had been her second choice.

Now Stanley, upright, keen, splendid in soul and body, was defending her, was telling people that she was just like a little girl—all she had asked of life was kindness, and Fate had been so signally unkind. Shirley, with those conscious eyes, with those unscrupulous, rouged lips, with that little lace-clad body whose every charm she could estimate so perfectly—Shirley a grieving and innocent child!

Margaret could have laughed at the utter irony of it all, if she had not been too genuinely bewildered by the pain that twisted and turned in her own heart. Helpless and bound as she was, she would not admit that she had been weak enough to think of Stan herself, and yet the events of this afternoon had seemed to tear from her the first real peace and security she had known in the long years since her mother's death.

"If he were not such an idiot," Margaret said to herself, keeping her brain as busy as she could, to fight back the growing pain in her heart, "if he were entirely different, he might

make—some woman—a good husband. He and the right sort of wife could make a wonderful life, down at the farm. Just because I don't like him is no reason why such a woman as that should get him. I do *like* him," she corrected herself, in a moment of honesty, "even if he does make me feel awkward and—I don't know, *young*, whenever we are alone together for an instant. I wish he would marry some nice woman, and that I could be their friend, and visit them at 'Uplands.'"

Instead, Shirley would be there, Shirley selfish and petty, planning parties, rushing away again, chattering of Hawaii with the Masons, of three weeks in New York for frocks, lying under the arbor with her sewing, dozing, yawning.

She would be accepted, Margaret knew, not by everyone, but by a number sufficient to insure her the general excitement and entertaining for which she lived. Society was full of other women none too sure of their social footing; Stanley Crittenden's name was in itself the greatest bulwark that any career would need.

It was no longer a vague fear, to be reasoned with, and dismissed. It was a fact: they were engaged.

Margaret's thoughts came back and back to it hopelessly. They were engaged. All the arguments she had used for weeks, the assurance she had felt that, however much Stanley admired her, he *could* not seriously consider Shirley as his wife, died away forever. Logic, reason, common-sense were all wasted here: it was over, and they were engaged.

She had fought hard battles in her life before, but she felt beaten now. A great weariness and discouragement possessed her; there was only difficulty and struggle behind her; there was nothing ahead.

"I will get over this!" she said to herself lifelessly. "Everyone gets over everything!"

And suddenly she put her head down on the window-sill, and heartbreaking sobs shook her from head to foot. Mar-

garet did not try to stem the tide: she yielded limply and completely. Now and then the fury lessened for a few seconds, and she would pant, sniff childishly, mop her eyes with her tightly-rolled handkerchief, sigh deeply, and then tremble into bitter crying again.

She was exhausted, and was lying quiet, with her arm resting on the sill, her head on her hand, and her breast rising only on an occasional deep sigh; her weary brain idle too, drifting inconsequentially from one unimportant thought to another, when a knocking at her door made her heart suddenly begin to beat hard with fright.

Stanley was out, Mrs. Cutting was out. It must be Carrie, about breakfast. Or perhaps it was Foote to say that there was a telephone call.

Margaret got to her feet, fastened the Chinese coat she was wearing over her pajamas, ran her fingers through her disordered cloud of black hair, and went to the door. She touched a switch as she reached it, and opening it, bent her head a little, to avert her reddened eyes from a servant's curious look.

But it was Stanley who stood there, Stanley breathless and in a hurry.

"Margaret, did you see Shirley's—— But what's the matter?" he said, interrupting his message at the sight of her tear-stained face.

There was nothing for it now but honesty and courage. Margaret smiled.

"Nothing. My head aches," she said composedly. "What was it? Are you looking for something?"

"Shirley left her gold bag, with her rings in it, on the terrace," he said, in an abstracted tone, still interested in her. "No, but tell me, Margaret. You feel rotten, don't you?"

"Her bag?" Margaret said, in concern. "I'll ask Carrie or Foote. But I'm sure it wasn't left here!" She rang, and ran by him to give Foote, who immediately appeared, her direc-

tions, apparently with no consciousness, Stan thought, of her betraying appearance.

"Tell me, what's the trouble?" he persisted, almost before the man was gone. He came close to her, concerned and peremptory.

Margaret began to tremble; she was afraid. In the soft lights of the lower hall, exhausted from emotion and tears, and close to the splendid strength and sweetness of him, upon which in spite of herself she had come to depend, she felt every fibre of soul and body suddenly weaken. Hardly knowing what she did, she put her hands upon his shoulders, and the passionate gipsy face, proud and untamed still, despite the tell-tale signs of grief, was close to his own.

Held so—for his big arms instantly went about her—her youth and her dark beauty, and the supple slimness of her braced body, had their instant effect. Stanley smiled at her a little confusedly, his own laugh a little breathless, and his voice unsteady.

"Can't tell your big brother about it yet?"

"Oh, Stan—Stan—what shall I do?" she whispered.

A troubled look came into his face, and he said slowly:

"If it's money, Margaret, why don't you tell me? And if it's a man, at least I could handle him better than you can!"

Weakness—weakness—weakness—delicious and intoxicating weakness was running through her being like a subtle wine. She must not—she must not tell him——

"If it was neither, Stan? If it was *you?*" she breathed, with all the glory of her dark beauty, proud and reluctant even in surrender, held in his arms.

She saw his expression change. In an instant he was standing by the little table, one browned big hand resting with a strong grip upon the thick great history that happened to be lying there, and Margaret was ten feet away, her hands locked upon the back of a big tufted armchair.

Their eyes were fastened together; neither spoke. Both were breathing hard; Margaret looked frightened, Stanley only serious, thoughtful.

The pause lasted for a long minute. Then Stan said:

"I'm sorry. I never dreamed it. The way you spoke to me—that day——"

He stopped again, and Margaret presently said briefly:

"Yes. I know."

Another silence, while neither one moved a muscle.

"I thought there was someone else," Stanley said.

Margaret did not answer, or change her frightened, fascinated look.

"*Could* you have liked me?" Stanley presently asked sharply.

"I don't know," sne answered quickly.

"I see," he said. And after awhile he added slowly, "I see."

He came toward her, and to her fright she found him close again, with his arm about her shoulders.

"You—you—might have come to care," he began, and stopped.

Margaret's dark blue eyes, as she raised the long black lashes that were still stuck together with tears, answered the question.

"I didn't know!" she whispered. And she dropped her dark head in shame.

"I'm sorry," Stanley said slowly. "I'm sorry. I wish I had known! I never dreamed it!"

His arm was loosely about her, ner face dropped close against, but not touching, his breast. And for a long, long time they stood so, Margaret, through all the blind confusion of her senses, drinking in courage and peace from the mere nearness of his bigness and gentleness, and Stanley staring into the wide, dimly-lighted room with troubled and puzzled eyes.

Margaret suddenly freed herself, looked up at him, and managed a smile.

"Don't mind me!" she said, with an unexpected composure that made Stanley feel tremendously relieved. "I've been lonely, lately, and today—hearing of your happiness, I felt—well, perhaps I felt a little left out. There are times, you know, when some people seem to have everything and others nothing! I don't know why I'm acting so foolishly. I hope you'll forget it as fast as you can!"

Stanley felt a thrill of admiration for her; she had never seemed to him so lovable as she was at this moment, with her eyes still stained with tears, her black, childish lashes sopping wet, her rebellious gipsy eyes challenging him, and her gipsy body braced proudly; refusal of any pity, any softening from him, writ large in every fibre of her. Her defence, feeble as it was, was yet so gallantly, so courageously presented, that he hastened to accept it.

"Of course I understand!" he assured her quickly. Foote coming in at this moment with no news of the bag, the two men left the hallway together, Stanley only giving Margaret a nod for good-night.

Her tears were dried, the storm was over. Immediately and quickly, she went upstairs and got ready for bed, refusing to analyze, refusing even to recall, the events of the past fifteen minutes. But her cheeks were still burning with excitement and shame, and she was breathing hard.

"What comes *over* me when that man is around?" she asked herself scornfully. "He'll think I'm an absolute imbecile! But I don't care in the least what he thinks," Margaret assured herself, getting into bed and opening her book. "He's just engaged—he probably didn't notice anything out of the common!"

The open page grew meaningless; her gaze wandered, her memory brought back Stan's voice——

Margaret could bear it no longer. She leaped out of bed,

reached for her wrapper, and went into Mrs. Cutting's room to report Shirley's loss. Mrs. Cutting was positive that Shirley had not had the bag when she came up to the terrace that afternoon.

"But we'll never hear the last of that bag!" predicted Stan's aunt, as her grey hair was folded into kids. "That'll mean more to her than Stan does! Oh, my dear," said she, sighing, "I'm not one bit happy about this. I've been thinking about it—it isn't only his poor old auntie speaking! She's not the woman for him, Margaret. . . ."

The scene with Stan had quieted Margaret; sheer fatigue and the blind optimism of her youth had soothed heart and brain into a sort of happiness again. But now the agony all came back with a rush: it was over, it was announced. They were engaged!

CHAPTER XII

MRS. CUTTING'S prediction proved true. Shirley came in before breakfast the next morning, and although Margaret did not see her greeting to Stan, who was playing with the collie and Jim on the terrace, she knew it must have been but a brief one, for almost immediately Shirley came swiftly into the library, where Margaret was writing checks.

Margaret herself had given Stanley but a fleeting half-glimpse of her eyes, when he came out to join her and the child that morning, and had immediately disappeared. She had schooled her glance to be merely friendly and impersonal; she was woman enough to be disappointed at receiving exactly the same sort of look in return. Now she was in common civility bound to return to the terrace with Shirley.

"I shall be *sick* if I have lost that bag," reiterated Shirley, for the twentieth time. "It was the handsomest one I've ever seen, you couldn't replace it anywhere! I *know* I had it at Elise's yesterday, because when I went back and didn't have it, after dinner, to pay my bridge losses, she said she *remembered* having seen it *in my hand* when I waved good-bye. Oh, I *can't* have lost it—it was stolen, of course, that's what it was! And my emerald ring, the emeralds and the diamond—the emeralds were worth a thousand apiece—I took it off because my hand is getting so thin! Oh, I'm just *sick* over the whole thing—I laid it right here, on the brick wall, I remember distinctly!"

"I sent Foote down last night," Margaret said, feeling her very soul flutter at the memory of that hour, but without a

glance at Stan, "and this morning we've had them all searching, all down the terraces, and even in the lane!"

"Ah, well, of course they wouldn't find it," Shirley said, with an ungracious, significant look. "Somebody's got it. I've telephoned for a detective," she added, in an undertone, with a glance toward the French windows that opened into the dining-room, where one of the maids was busy, "and he'll place it—you'll see. Whoever's got it has simply *got* to produce it, because, even if they melted the bag and picked out the stones, it would be perfectly simple to identify them."

"And was there money in it?" Margaret asked, in that correct and comfortable concern all the world can feel for the losses of others.

"Oh, some—ten or twelve dollars, and a check of Mary Page's—I'll telephone her and have it stopped. But it was *right here*——" Shirley began again, restlessly searching the terrace, rustling the thick, dusty ivy leaves, kneeling to run her hand under the gnarled ropes of the vine.

"Had breakfast?" Stanley asked, as the maid came to the door and bowed.

"Oh, breakfast!" Shirley echoed, outraged. "I tell you I valued that ring more than anything else I *have!*" she reminded him, reproachfully. "I saw it on the Place Vendôme, just after we were married—you remember it?" she asked Margaret, pathetically. "It was the most remarkable thing I ever saw, a big clover of three emeralds, with a fourth leaf of diamonds! It was *unique*."

"Well, you're due for another big ring," Stanley said, good-humoredly. Shirley did not hear him.

"You put my coat away—where?" she asked, impatiently. "What did you have in your hands? Can't you remember?"

For twenty minutes they hunted on, while Jimmie finished his breakfast, and the hot sunlight crept fully upon the terraces. Shirley led Stanley and Margaret down and still further down the steps, fretting, angry, vituperative.

"Do go in and get your coffee, Miss Yorke," the man presently said. "Or tea, rather!" he added, smiling.

Shirley had been up playing bridge, and incidentally losing rubber after rubber, until after two o'clock. The Pebble Beach party, before that, had been extremely fatiguing; the members of it, indeed, had all returned to their homes tired, nervous, feverish and cross. Her engagement, too, had taken a certain amount of energy from her; she must be exhaustingly sweet and responsive with everyone now, answer the same questions endlessly, and tell the same story. And the loss of her bag and her ring had genuinely agitated her.

So Shirley was at the end of her self-control. Margaret's cool freshness, in her thin old swiss dress, her dark composure, and her obvious disinclination to consider the loss serious, exasperated Shirley. She turned savagely to Stan.

"And do for pity's sake go get your own!" she urged him. "A man is absolutely unreasonable, there's no use trying to get a civil word out of him, before breakfast!"

Stan made the mistake of trying to conciliate her.

"I'm sorry, dear," he said in a penitent undertone. "Don't be cross——"

"Excuse me, I'm not cross!" Shirley answered sharply.

"No, I know you're not, dear," Stan murmured abjectly. "Poor little girl, she lost her gold bag, and she puckered up her pretty little face and just pretended to be cross!" he said.

"Oh, please don't talk *baby-talk!*" Shirley cried desperately. "I just can't stand anything more this morning!"

"You'll find it," Margaret said soothingly, an unwilling third in this little scene. "You've just put it somewhere, and any minute you may remember! And do have some coffee——"

"I know I've put it somewhere, but I was hunting the house over half the night!" Shirley said, not sorry to be appeased. "Oh, dear!" she lamented, standing headachy and despairing

in the heat and ready to burst into tears. "Oh, *dear*—why did this have to happen just now! Stan," she said, after a moment's stern reflection, remounting the steps on her way to the breakfast-room, "Stan, you'll have to round them all up—everyone who was in the house—there's no use having the detectives, otherwise! I *know* I had it here, and anyway, you can tell them I'm doing the same thing at my own house. *Someone* has it," Shirley added, at the breakfast table now, looking vaguely at her napkin. "It just makes me frantic to think of somebody picking it up—*my* bag and *my* ring! What a haul for him! And what possessed me to lay it down——"

Foote's return from a tour of investigation, with a handkerchief of Shirley's, picked up in the lane, threw her into fresh anxieties. That handkerchief, she was *sure*, had been in the bag. That meant that the thief had emptied it, perhaps shoved it out of sight under some stone or behind some tree. The reward of Foote's innocent efforts to be of use was that she immediately began to suspect him.

"I thought you were coming into town with me?" Stan asked her, after the distracted meal.

"Oh, I can't!" she answered, quickly. "Those men will be down. I shall simply have to stay here until the things are *found*. They can't vanish into thin air, you know! I suppose there are a thousand places where he could have stuck them. . . ."

All morning long the quiet life of the household was demoralized by the search. Margaret took the precaution, before the detectives arrived, of gathering the eleven servants of the indoor and outdoor staff together and warning them of what was impending.

"Mrs. Theobald believes she lost it here," she said, in a smiling and significant undertone. "I don't. I think she will find it at home. But, meanwhile, give these men any help you can and answer all their questions, won't you?"

The interested staff innocently consented. But Margaret

trembled for her smoothly-running domestic machinery when she considered exactly the nature of the approaching investigation. The morning was hot, and the hours dragged. At eleven o'clock, to Mrs. Cutting's secret indignation, the detectives did actually arrive and begin to be businesslike and briskly interrogatory.

Once more the terraces and lawns and steps were searched; Margaret now had a sort of mental picture of the gold bag, and seemed to see it in a hundred places: huddled limply against the potted ferns, dangling on a button of Shirley's coat, crushed and stepped upon under the dry yellow grass of the lane.

Shirley finally wept, and went home with a blazing headache. She left Margaret pacifying Carrie and Daisy, who had been given the third degree, according to their own stories, and were also weeping.

"Oh, the gall of him—'How long have you lived with your mother?' he ast me. I could of choked him!" sobbed Daisy, who was a daily communicant, and the president of the local branch of the Children of Mary.

"I give him the dirtiest look I could, and I says, 'Oh, is that *so*—what are you going to do about it?'" Carrie said, more valiantly.

"Well, I hope he'll keep his good health until he'll find something stolen in my trunk—not if it was a stick of gum!" Mary, the house-woman, middle-aged and widowed, added roundly. Margaret, seated among them, half sympathetic, half amused, tactfully returned the conversation to the simple question of the loss again.

"Girls, girls, she doesn't know you as I do, and naturally she wants to leave no stone unturned! It is maddening, you know, to lose such a valuable thing!"

"My God, I hope he don't marry her!" Mary, with the privilege of a servant who had tied Stan Crittenden's napkin about his little chin thirty years ago, exclaimed piously.

Margaret's smile died, and a great coldness and weariness came over her.

"She's not divorced yet, Mary."

"A lot that'd worry *her*," Mary said, scornfully. Margaret sighed and left them, going slowly upstairs to superintend the work on the new table-linen. Everything was hot and troublesome and tiresome, today. Even Jim had been naughty, had annoyed Shirley, and Margaret carried a resentful recollection of Shirley's acid yet smiling response to the little boy's forced apology.

"Do you know, I think you are a pretty lucky little boy to get off so easily? I think that if *I* were your mama, and you slammed a screen door *four* times after you had been told not to, I would try to make you remember it next time! I think that if a boy I know was sert to bed for the afternoon——"

Nora, boiling with resentment at the investigation that had kept her and her charge in this noxious neighborhood for an hour, and boiling afresh at this hint of authority from the lady they all now knew as "Mr. Stan's intended," had borne Jimmie sobbing from the scene at this point, and Margaret had taken it upon herself to follow the small boy, see him happily established in the shadow of the sand-box, wiped the wet little cheeks, and held the throbbing little body in her arms until Jim's breath was quiet again. But the sting remained, and she felt angrily that her indifference to Shirley was rapidly being developed into something like actual dislike and contempt.

The episode of the lost treasures quieted down in a day or two, and except for Shirley's occasional bitter reference to her loss, and except for the distrust and dislike she still felt for Foote, it apparently left no ripple upon all their lives. And yet to each one of the three young people, to the servants, and to Jim, the event was permanently important.

Jim had never shown any feeling, in one way or another, to Shirley. But now he disliked her with all the force of his baby

power, and she knew it. The servants detested her, as being the cause of their mortifying treatment at the detectives' hands, and to Margaret, struggling with the most painful and deep emotions of her life, Shirley became hateful, from this day on. Margaret loathed her baby beauty, her voice, her pretty affectations, her occasional flashes of a mood neither pretty nor affected. Besides that, it was because of the lost bag that Stan had come back to the house, that night, and that he and she had had that memorable hour. And that hour had filled Margaret with disquiet and heartache; she was not able to blot it out and go on as if it had not been.

To Stanley, although neither Margaret nor Shirley dreamed it, the episode, trifling as it seemed, had been extraordinarily significant. He had seen each woman in a new rôle that night; Shirley agitated over the loss of jewels another man had given her, furious, exacting, within only a few hours of the time when she had promised to be his wife, and Margaret for the first time broken, gentle, yielding, and admittedly suffering.

Stan was not analytical; his mental processes were rather slow. But even without defining it he marvelled, in his own simple way, that Shirley, while thinking herself so admirable, could be so frankly material and suspicious and exacting, and that under Margaret's repressed and quiet manner the flame of an endearing and loving personality could burn so bright.

Meanwhile he and Shirley moved rapidly, noisily, gaily through their days. He saw her radiant and pretty in her frail linens and beautiful hats; she fluttered across the clean grass of the golf greens in pleated skirts and bright jackets; she murmured close against his heart in the quiet corners of the club ballroom or of this or that dim library.

Murmured, talked, laughed—but always about herself. Stan wondered that he had never noted that before. It was charming in its way, accompanied by dimples, smiles, the piquant phrases that she used for conversation.

But he marvelled, in his simple, unexacting way, at the long tales she told him, tales of quarrels of all sorts, in which she was invariably victor. She had vanquished men, women, chambermaids and waiters, stewards on boats, and paying tellers in banks. She had angled for all sorts of things in her checkered life, and quite innocently and gaily she told Stan about them; how she had managed Cuyler without his knowing it, tricked him into buying furs, how she had manipulated everything when his mother died, and foiled his avaricious cousins, how she had proposed to her women friends that they "double and re-double everything" in the Bridge Tournament, and so of course had won the prizes for top scores, how she had returned the blue hat to Joseph's after wearing it once, and talked them all down.

When this sort of thing temporarily failed her, or she was tired, she wanted merely to pet and be petted. Did he know he was the handsomest man in the St. Francis today? Well, he was. And tell her again the nice thing King Bartlett said about her? Did he? It was sweet of him, and she did think she looked nice at the dinner. And she thought—no, seriously, that Willis Hyde-Brown had a crush on her, what did he know about that? Wasn't that killing?

Stan realized, before they had been a month engaged, that Shirley was as eager as ever for the admiration of other men. He disliked the idea, even while he told himself that, after all, she would settle down when once she was his wife. Much that she did and said jarred upon him; he would laugh, but it was sometimes a troubled and annoyed laugh, and he found himself more and more in the position of an apologist.

"Why do you let it bother you, dear?" he said, over and over again, as October brought the wedding-day nearer and nearer, and Shirley showed an increasing inclination to criticize her friends, to resent their various attitudes toward her and her plans, and to force Stan into partisanship.

"You'd let anybody walk on your face, Stan," Shirley said,

in good-natured contempt. "But I won't. People are going to be decent to me, or I'll know why!"

And the vicious little compression of her lips as she spoke, and the angry glint in her brown eyes, made Stanley feel uncomfortable; he could not quite laugh at it as a childish trick. He felt uncomfortable and ashamed and even curiously pitying of her. Women had always been of one type to Stanley, before this: the type that makes peace, that concedes, that is dignified and self-confident. He began to realize that there is a distinctly opposed type, and that Shirley represented it.

And when he thought this ne would try loyally to remember her good points, and perhaps would ask himself somewhat blankly what they were. What had impressed him so, down at Pebble Beach a few weeks ago?

Well, he would remember, she had always been extremely smart in appearance, and she had played bridge and chattered and laughed with the others, and she was undeniably pretty, and somehow he had drifted into the idea of marrying her—why not? She had joked about it, it had been merely a farce at first. And then one day she had seemed a little blue, a little lonely and wistful, and she had said, "Let's not pretend, today. I want you really to—like me—today!" And the Cannons and the Riverses, with all the jokes and cocktails and dancing and rushing about, had oddly seemed to enhance the idea of their tender little understanding. Stanley had been in a perfectly false atmosphere, he had acted without thought.

However, he would remind himself, there was—there *must* be, some real character, some real fineness in Shirley. She was a pretty creature, she had lots of friends, she had had a hard road to hoe. Stan was inclined to be generous to her, even in the matter of their engagement. It was important to her to land somebody, and she had landed him; it had been pretty "raw," he would think to himself, with a rueful grin, half contemptuous and half admiring, as he remembered

the Pebble Beach days, the drinking, the rushing, the games and meals and excitement; remembered that Shirley, knowing she had the Cannons to back her, had stated saucily that she was going to tell them that she and Stan were engaged "just for the fun!"

Just for the fun, and Stan had realized the significance of it all exactly as if he had been at a play. Who was going to draw the line when it was time to stop the "fun"? Shirley, excited and perfumed and demonstrative? He himself, caught so neatly in her net? Emily Cannon, hysterically and delightedly confirming it with every word she said, or Joe, who was sober not one instant of the whole trip?

Up to that time, Stan had liked Shirley. Now he hardly knew what he felt toward her. There were moods when he was actually a little afraid of her, there were others when all feeling where she was concerned seemed to have dropped from him like an empty garment; he could not animate it again. Then she seemed to him almost inhuman, subject to no code and no rules, impossible of approach.

Stanley's spirit, at these times, experienced an immense blankness. Every word he said to Shirley, every smile and look, seemed strained and uneasy. He was always glad when the critical, uncomfortable mood passed by, and some re-establishment of her sway over him made him feel the solid ground under his feet again.

He had no time to think of Margaret. She slipped, quite naturally, into the background of his life. Stanley was rushing so constantly from club breakfast to tea, to dinner, to theatres and dances, that Margaret's determined effort to keep out of his way during his brief times at home was entirely successful, and quite unnoticed by him. Jim was having measles, and Nora and Margaret hardly left the nursery.

But when the measles was over, it was arranged that the two women should take the invalid down to "Uplands" for his convalescence. It was a fortnight after they had gone

that Stanley chanced to go down there with a cattle-man from Washington, who had come to rate his herd. Shirley had exacted from him a promise to return to Burlingame for a dinner, for her divorce was granted now, and she was telling her friends quite openly of her plans, and had set the wedding-day. Stan felt an amused sympathy with the familiar type of harassed married man as he promised her to come back, and tactfully explained to the old appraiser that he would be obliged to leave him at the farm.

"Who's boss, anyway?" he said to her, departing.

"I'm boss!" Shirley said.

CHAPTER XIII

THEY reached "Uplands" at about four o'clock upon a warm October afternoon. Dusk would be only an hour later, and already the autumn tree-shadows were lying in long parallel lines across the clean-swept, hard-packed roads, and the foliage everywhere was thinned and yellowed. There had been rains, the air was washed and sweet; yellow pumpkins were ripening in the bared fields, and among the twisted and discolored leaves of the vines great bunches of purple and gold grapes were dangling. The sun was descending behind a screen of tattered and brilliantly dyed eucalyptus trees, the streaming bars of light poured through them with all the dramatic beauty of a Turner painting, or like the shining spokes of some medieval Ascension.

There was a wonderful deep peace over the whole place; the shabby whitewashed ranch-house, the porches and barns and fences, and the brooding great trees. Cattle were filing toward the barns, with the lazy clanking of cow-bells; crickets were shrilling, and bees boomedin the aromatic airs of the garden, where the sweetness of the burned peppers and the piny red woods was mingled with that of all the late flowers.

Stanley was conscious of a little quickening of his pulse; he would be glad to see Jim and Margaret again. He looked about for her as he stopped the car at the porch steps, and almost immediately her tall, swiftly-moving graceful figure appeared on the porch, and she came down to the car.

She greeted the big cattle-man unsmilingly, but with all her usual sweetness and composure. To Stanley she gave hardly

a glance; it was evidently one of her serious days, when she withdrew so mysteriously into herself.

Stanley found himself maneuvering for her look. He loved this soft, brilliantly colored voile dress that she so often wore, and the Spanish-looking broad-brimmed hat that shadowed her dark face.

"I think Mr. Crittenden has to go right back, Mr. Kent," she said. "But will you walk about the farm with me while the light lasts? Your aunt is not well, Stan," she added to Stanley. "Will you go in and see her?"

"Right away!" Stan said, concernedly. "But where do you get this got-to-go-back stuff?" he asked perversely. He had telephoned his aunt this afternoon that he would have barely half-an-hour at the farm, but now he felt entirely unwilling to go away.

Margaret gave him a temperate glance and shrugged her shoulders slightly. Stanley felt that she declined to argue with a fool, and set off upon their tour, five minutes later, in a somewhat unsympathetic mood.

But the charm of the place rapidly restored both to friendliness again, and when they came to Battersby's white cottage, around the cut of the hill, Margaret's face brightened into positive radiance.

"Oh, Stan, your aunt told you about the baby?" she asked eagerly. "There's a new baby here, Mr. Kent," she explained to the visitor, "two weeks old today! Wait a minute——"

She flashed into the cottage, whose walls were not so sturdy but what the men on the porch could hear a certain murmuring, like the warm cooing of doves, within, and then Margaret's laugh, and then the sudden bitter "oo-wah-wah!" of the new-born child.

Immediately Margaret reappeared, the pacified but still tearful infant upon her arm. Old Kent bent interestedly over the eternal miracle, and little Jim pushed his brown face close against the aggrieved little pasty face. But Stanley looked at

Margaret, and he knew that he was seeing one of the immortally lovely sights of life: a young and beautiful woman, with her intense and adoring face bent over the pulsing scrap of flesh and blood that is held with mysterious expertness in her arms, and safe only in such a haven.

"I hear that you officiated, Margaret?" he said.

Her name, and his tone, and this unexpected hour with him, made her heart begin to hammer; she summoned her self-control angrily, she had been so sure of herself only an hour ago!

"When the doctor came," she said proudly, "we had had our bath, and we and our muzzer were sound asleep!"

And she laid her exquisite warm cheek against the fuzzy head and touched her lips to the wrinkled little forehead.

"Nice party for a girl like you!" he said, when Patricia Eleanor had been restored to her mother, and they were walking on.

"It was terrifying while it lasted, I was so afraid of doing something wrong," she conceded. "But I felt very triumphant when we came out with flying colors!"

"You love children, don't you?" Stanley asked, curiously teased by some inner desire to make her talk, to assure himself that they were friends.

"Oh, yes!" she answered simply, smiling at him, and then down at Jim, who had found a heavy spike and was solemnly carrying it, beside her.

"Shirley says this one is spoiled, and needs discipline," he told her, with an amused glance at the little boy.

"Jim?" she asked sharply. And she paled a little, an odd look coming into her dark, brilliant face. "In what way?"

"*I* don't think he's spoiled, I think he's the corkingest little kid I ever knew—he's never underfoot!" Stanley hastened to say. "Shirley really doesn't know him. She'll like him better, later on!"

"It's to be the twenty-seventh," Margaret said, reminded by his last words of the approaching wedding.

"Or thereabouts," Stanley answered. And a sudden cool doubt assailed him. He walked along in silence, busy with uneasy and troubled thoughts. "I have a silly feeling of—homesickness," he confessed suddenly, after a while.

"Homesickness for what?" Margaret asked quickly.

"Oh—for all this!" He indicated with a wave of his hand the peaceful autumn twilight that was so quickly filling the world, the white, low-roofed house from which yellow lights were streaming into the chilly dusk, the blue smoke rising into softer shadows, the dim bulk of the guardian trees, in the great circle of the darkening mountains. "Just that smell of old Hang cooking steak and onions, and of 'Cension's beans, makes my—my heart ache," he said.

"But you're *here!*" Margaret said, laughing.

"Yes, I know. But I'm homesick just the same!" Stanley repeated. And quite without premeditation, in the protecting twilight, his swinging hand caught hers, and he held the vital warm brown fingers tightly.

"Please!" she said, in a suddenly shaken voice. "Please don't be silly!"

"I'm not being silly," Stanley said, incoherently, and, laughing excitedly, he held her back in the thick dusk, at the steps of the porch.

"You know you are," she said, in a low, shaking voice.

"But why do you care?" Stanley asked, his arms about her.

"I don't know!" Margaret whispered. And he saw her eyes glint like star-sapphires in the gloom.

Immediately she pushed him away, ran up the steps, and followed the others into the soft, lamp-lighted cheerfulness of the plain old spacious sitting-room. Stanley, coming in after her, sank into a chair, and amused himself by trying to catch her eye.

Her color was flaming, her beautiful mouth set; she had a

thousand things to do. She moved about, talking to the guest, to Mrs. Cutting, to Jim, and to old Miss Porter; but she never looked at Stan, and his heart began to beat in pleasurable anticipation of the moment when she must meet his steady gaze. Persistently evading him, with a steadily heightening color, she mounted a chair to pull down a refractory window curtain, she pushed another chair into the fireside circle, she knelt before the fire and encouraged it with chips, and when little Jim asked her some question, she encircled him with her arm and thoughtfully kissed the top of his golden head twice before she answered. And all the time she never once glanced at Stanley.

"Margaret!" he said, when she was busily assorting packs of cards at the table only a few feet away from him.

"Just a moment——" Still she could not look up.

"My dear, why don't you give me a job?" Stanley said, in an amused undertone, the general conversation isolating them for a moment.

Now she looked at him steadily, with a sort of patience.

"You see it all to do," she said simply.

"But I'm lazy!" Stanley pleaded.

"I thought you had to go back to Burlingame?"

"I do. Unless you can think me up a good excuse to stay here?" Stanley began. But with a vague look, magnificent in its abstraction, Margaret had carried off the cards; and he had no further opportunity to speak to her alone that night.

Ten minutes later, with incredible reluctance, he tore himself from the homely comfort of the scene: the snapping fire, the small boy with his blocks, the Airedale puppy stretched on the hearth, and the card-table at which, among the three older persons, this proud, resentful, flaming gipsy of a girl was sitting. Stan loved every inch of the room, the books, the hangings and rugs, and the softly blooming lamps; he left it with real pain. This was home.

Well, he and Shirley would live here sometimes, he thought.

But it was not Shirley's natural setting. Shirley liked only to rest and be idle here, or to entertain just as she would entertain anywhere else. He could not imagine Shirley interested in the heifers, the Airedales, or even the Battersbys' baby.

Shirley felt awkward with babies. Once, with the frankness of her generation, however, she had spoken to him of their possible children, or rather, of their possible child.

"I shouldn't mind, in a few years, if you're crazy for one!" she had conceded, with unembarrassed calculation. "We can always have a nurse for it!"

Somehow this speech, this generously offered concession, had affronted Stan more than if she had been an ignorant girl unwilling to consider such responsibilities at all. Such a girl might have ripened; might have changed. But Shirley knew whereof she spoke; she would not change.

Driving north, in the chill autumn night of the high mountains, he thought of Margaret Yorke again. There was a woman hard for any man to conquer. She would fight to the last ditch—but, ah, the proud fineness her surrender when she did surrender! It would embrace everything, he thought: old-fashioned, tender, unashamed wifely love and trust; old-fashioned, prayerful welcoming of children; it would embrace gardens and flowers, and little clean aprons, and cribs, and ice-cream freezers, and—yes, and *goodness*.

"But not for me!" he said, with a sudden deep ache in his heart. "I wish to goodness I didn't always get sentimental with her—I swore I wouldn't, again. But the moment we're alone together—I'll be hanged if I know why it is! She hates it, too, and I don't blame her. I'll run down to the farm in a few days, and be just as reserved as she is——

"Margaret Yorke. She's a funny one—hard to make out. Margaret Yorke."

"Stanley, this is Margaret. Can you hear me?"

Stanley, his whole quiet office suddenly metamorphosed,

nodded to Miss Blake to shut the door and concentrated upon his telephone.

"Certainly—I hear you. Where are you—at the farm?"

"No, we are at San Mateo—we came home this morning. Stanley, you had better come down at once, I think. Your aunt is very ill."

"Aunt Hattie!" His voice was amazed. He had seen them at the farm, when he took old Kent down, only day before yesterday, and he had telephoned his aunt yesterday. She had not been well, exactly, complaining of those tedious pains again, but he had had no warning of this. "What seems to be the matter?" he asked, in concern.

"We don't know. Doctor Pullen has sent for Carter and White. She seems——"

"For God's sake!" Stanley ejaculated. "Why don't they bring her in to a hospital?"

"They don't think they had better move her, Stan."

His tone changed.

"I'll be there in twenty-five minutes," he said quietly, hanging up his telephone.

Less than half an hour later he was tiptoeing upstairs in the Burlingame house, which already wore the air of hush and expectancy that is inseparable from serious illness. Stan saw with shock that there was a strange nurse going up the stairs ahead of him, and that another nurse met her in the upper hall and they conferred together. Foote looked terrified, but could tell him nothing, and Carrie merely shook her head to all inquiries, but Margaret came out of his aunt's bedroom door as he approached it and drew him quietly down the hall and into her own room.

"The doctors are here, Stan; they're in the upstairs sitting-room. I've got four nurses here; they think they will have to operate, in Jim's night nursery—they took that because it's so bare, and they can wash it all out with antiseptics. They're bringing a table from the hospital——"

"What *is* it?" Stanley asked, his fingers gripping her shoulder.

"It's—they *fear* a broken appendix," she answered. "She was in such pain this morning that I suggested we come up from the farm and see Pullen—I never dreamed that it might be the worst thing we could do, to move her. Now they're afraid that it is pretty late to operate—they aren't sure. But the only thing to do——"

"Is cut, of course," he supplied quickly. "How is she? Is she suffering now? Does she know it?"

"She's wonderful. She's lying quite still; they keep a nurse watching her all the time—she mustn't stir. But you must come and see her—she wants to see you——"

"It's the end," he whispered, following her through the hall.

"It's serious, of course," Margaret answered guardedly. "But they say she's in good condition."

Stanley felt dazed. Aunt Hat had stood in his mother's place for twenty years; she had always been goodness itself to him, loyal, proud, devoted. Aunt Hat seriously sick!

He went into her altered, orderly room. This was Aunt Hat, so still under the plain, stretched sheet, with her face looking old and colorless without its usual rouge and powder and softening fringe of waved hair.

Her eyes moved, her lips smiled, she stirred a wrinkled hand. The nurse, correct in stiff white, made a prohibitory movement.

"Don't move, dear!"

Stan took the chair beside her and held her hand.

"Well, these are great doings!" he said.

His aunt's smile deepened.

"It'll be a comfort to have the wretched thing *out*," she said, with calm heroism. "Then there'll be no more of those stupid pains! I'm glad Pullen advises it."

"Oh, so do I!" Stanley agreed, thankful that she was so little apprehensive.

"Just ten days before my boy's wedding," she said tenderly. "Never mind, I shall be able to sit up for it!"

"We'll have it right here in your room!" he promised. But he had a swift hope that Shirley would see the propriety of postponing even so quiet a wedding for a few weeks, until his aunt was safely convalescent. He remembered suddenly that he had promised to meet Shirley and a real-estate agent this morning at twelve, to look at an apartment in California Street. Shirley was enthusiastic about it, as a future home. Stan heard the clock in the hall softly chiming twelve as he remembered it. He shrugged, smiled, and turned back to his aunt.

Shirley telephoned, angry and incredulous, at one o'clock. Margaret was called to the telephone to speak to her.

"We called him home, Mrs. Theobald. Mrs. Cutting is seriously ill."

"Well, I don't care who's seriously ill, I want to speak to him!" Shirley said furiously. "I wait and wait——"

"I can't call him now," Margaret protested. "She is in the surgery, and Mr. Crittenden is waiting to learn what the doctors find."

"Isn't this the Burlingame house?" Shirley asked, after a pause. "Well, then, why do you say surgery?" she added, impatiently, as Margaret answered with an affirmative. "Ah——?" she said, in a completely changed tone, when Margaret had more fully explained the situation. "I see! I didn't understand. Isn't that terrible?" she said eagerly. "They don't think—they don't think there's any *danger*, do they?"

In short, all Shirley's acquisitive eagerness, all her sense of her own importance as Stan's promised wife, was instantly awakened. Stan was comfortably rich now, he would be

really rich when Mrs. Cutting died and his grandparents' fortune was his. There would be wills, and estates, and newspaper talk, and jewels and laces and all sorts of valuable personal treasures to distribute, and to whom would they naturally gravitate if not to Shirley? She must wear mourning, of course, and the wedding must be arranged even more quietly than before. And meanwhile she could occupy a romantic position in the house of sickness.

Her impatience vanished, she immediately went home, changed to a dark, trailing black gown, arranged her golden hair in demure scallops, took some delicate needlework, and walked thoughtfully and pensively to the Cutting home. Margaret, suddenly entering the library at three o'clock, found her established there, on a deep divan beside Stan, their fingers locked, and Shirley's baby face the picture of conscious sympathy and grief.

Stan got to his feet and walked to Margaret, his face grave.

"No news," Margaret said. "They have brought her to her room—the heart is good. They found a terrible condition. The doctors want to talk to you, Stan——"

"Stan?" Shirley echoed the familiarity, amused, and Margaret flushed. "I think I will go up with Mr. Crittenden," Shirley added, mournfully sweet, but jealously intent upon everything Margaret said, and with a faint stressing of the last two words.

Stan gave her a perplexed look and instantly turned to Margaret.

"Take us up—you're in charge," he said, including her deliberately in the intimate circle. Margaret went with them up the stairs.

"Isn't this frightful?—like a thunderbolt," Shirley said, greeting the doctors, all of whom she knew. "I had an engagement with Stanley—waited and waited," she told them, raising pathetic brown eyes. "Then I telephoned—the office first, and then the house. They didn't know where he was, at the

office; poor boy, he feels simply crushed," Shirley said pitifully, holding his hand. "We all are! I can't believe it—but I *know*, I just *know*—she'll do beautifully!"

Nobody paid any attention to this speech, or to others of a like nature that Shirley poured out as she seated herself next to Stanley. A grave discussion of the operation ensued: Mrs. Cutting had survived it, they could say no more. It would be hours, possibly days, before they could give any definite hope; at the moment everything except her splendid resistance was against her.

"Oh, I'm just not going to believe that she's going to die—it's just too terrible!" Shirley said

Margaret said nothing; except in answer to brief questions or directions from the doctors, but her anxious eyes—surprisingly anxious, Stanley thought, moved constantly from face to face. He was conscious of feeling a deep confidence in her; that while she was here things would be rightly managed, conscious of a certain impatient dislike of Shirley's fluttering and exclaiming. It was not within reason that Shirley should genuinely regret his aunt, he told himself. She explained, with some circumlocution, that she thought she had better go to the Yardsleys' dinner, after all. She knew there were to be a couple of extra men, so Mollie Yardsley would not be embarrassed by Stan's non-appearance, and she, Shirley, would be able to give them all an account of poor Aunt Hattie.

"Nothing can happen tonight," she argued. "There is really no reason why you shouldn't go too, Stan. I know these cases—it'll be days before we know, and anyway, it isn't as if it was your mother, you know."

"Still, I think I had better stay," Stanley said, patiently and gravely. He was conscious, and Margaret was conscious, of an impatience to have her gone—out of the house, out of sight and hearing.

She went at about five; and Stanley went softly into the

sick-room, to find Margaret and one of the nurses watching. Mrs. Cutting was restlessly dozing. Margaret smiled at him, and followed him into the hall, again beckoning him into her room.

"I think either you or I had better be there always, Stan. Of course, the nurses know more than we do; but still—there's a feeling about having one of her own there," she said.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"Oh, I think she will get well!" she said, quickly. "I don't dare think anything else," she added, slowly. "I don't dare think what it would mean to me to have your aunt die!"

"Is there any reason why you shouldn't stay on here and run the house and Jim?" he asked, in a whisper.

"Yes—every reason," she answered unexpectedly. "I couldn't—go on. My whole life, all my plans, would be wrecked. But I'm not going to think of that! She's going to get well!"

"Are you so fond of her, Margaret?" Stanley asked, surprised.

"Yes, I am. But it's not that," Margaret answered, honestly. "I—I wish I could tell you."

"You've told her?" he asked. "She knows—about you?"

"No. Nobody!"

She was standing near a great colored window that faced westward; it was flooded now with red dying sunlight, and Margaret's dusky beauty seemed to radiate, too, as she turned her earnest, trusting eyes toward him. Stanley felt a sudden overpowering impulse to take her in his arms; dark head, glowing face, slender nervous hands.

"I wish that you were free," he said suddenly and irrationally.

"*You* wouldn't be!" she reminded him, with her rare smile.

"Yes, but I would take you away—thousands of miles, to the mountains back of Rio—or to the Canadian woods —you're so good to us all, you're so tired!" Stanley said,

laughing nervously, hardly knowing what he said or did, his arm suddenly tight about her slim shoulders, her dusky head resting against him. His voice was strained; he felt himself tremble.

"Ah, I wish you might, I wish you might, Stan!" Margaret answered, wearily and quietly. And turning in his embrace, she raised her face to his, a puzzled look of childish wonderment and wistfulness in her dark eyes. Stanley bent his mouse-colored head—she was not a very tall woman, after all—and they kissed each other.

It was a kiss two children might have exchanged; it was as if her utter loneliness and tiredness clung to his strength, as his own desperate need to her sweetness. And when it was over she remained in his arms, her hands resting lightly against the sleeves of his coat, her eyes fixed upon his.

"Margaret!" Stanley said, confusedly, "I didn't know I felt like that!"

"I didn't know I would ever feel—like that, again!" she answered, breathlessly.

For a minute they were silent, their eyes locked.

"I'm sorry!" Margaret whispered then, her wide-open gaze like a child's, vague, blank, expectant.

"Yes," Stanley said, slowly and unemotionally. "I'm sorry, too. Now what?" he asked her, blankly.

"Now nothing," she answered, with a little laugh and flush.

She freed herself from his arms and walked across the room. Stan followed her slowly to the window. Margaret turned and looked at him over her shoulder, a serious, deliberating look. It was as if the two saw each other for the first time, or as if together they had come upon some terrible and significant discovery.

"Margaret, you would be wonderful to the man you loved!" Stan said with a little laugh, in a low tone.

"I'm done with men!" she answered briefly.

"I think I could teach you—better!" the man said, in an odd voice.

She flashed him another glimpse of her dark blue eyes.

"We—can't—go back of this," Stanley submitted, after a silence.

"How do you mean go back?"

"As if it hadn't been!" he elucidated.

Margaret turned toward him in quick surprise.

"What *else* can we do?" she asked.

"I don't know," Stanley admitted youthfully.

Margaret's gaze was at once quizzical, amused, maternal.

"There is no possible combination of circumstances, you know," she reminded him, "under which we could mean anything to each other!"

Her composure touched his pride, and he said:

"You mean Mrs. Theobald's plans and mine?"

"Exactly!" Margaret said, smiling, beginning to breathe a little hard.

"So that my kissing you," Stanley said, deliberately taking her in his arms again, tipping back her dark head, and kissing her firmly and squarely upon her beautiful rebellious mouth, "only means that you are extremely generous to me—nothing more!"

An instant later she was free, panting, and standing ten feet away from him, her breast rising and falling stormily, her two thin, exquisite brown hands locked on her chest. Stanley was half laughing and half furious, his hand to his stinging cheek.

"I hate this high-school stuff!" Margaret said.

"I'm sorry—I beg your pardon! That was inexcusable," Stanley stammered. "I'm sorry! Please, please forgive me."

There was a long silence. Then he was terrified to see Margaret put her two hands over her face, and drop her head in them shamedly, like a crying child.

Nothing else seeming possible under the circumstances, he went to her timidly and once again put his arm about her shoulders. But there was only apology and gentleness in his voice as he said:

"I'm sorry, Margaret. It was my fault! It won't happen again, I promise you. I *promise* you!"

"No, it was mine," she said quietly, looking up. "I—good heavens! I'm ashamed of myself," she said.

"You see——" he was beginning eagerly, when she interrupted him.

"Let's not talk about it, Stanley. Better forgotten! I must go back to your aunt. That sort of thing isn't for me, my dear, and you're going to be married, one of these days. I'll not go to bed, tonight, I think," added Margaret, composedly returning to a sense of duty. "Somebody should be with her. Could you get some sleep, do you think, and then get up in two or three hours?"

And serenely, and obviously absorbed in her responsibility, she left the room. Stanley, declining the suggestion of rest, followed her to his aunt's bedside. He was bewildered. His mind was ringing with her voice; with her words. How glorious she had been in her anger; "I hate this high-school stuff!" And how exquisite had been that forced kiss; the soft protesting mouth, the crushed shoulders, the rebellion in every fibre of her young body!

They sat in chairs on either side of the big bed; the invalid sleeping heavily between them. Margaret was motionless; her sensitive fingers, in their transparent cuffs, clasped on the arms of her chair, her rounded, softly brown chin rising from another delicate frill. Her blue eyes rested, without moving, upon the invalid's flushed face.

The nurses came and went; one doctor was always there. Harriet Cutting moaned sometimes, and was still; the fight between life and death went on and on and on. It was no longer a question of doctors; it was not even a question of

nursing. The forces of the body were roused, for and against the detention of the spirit that fluttered between them, and back and forth the battle wavered: now she was holding her own; now she was showing an unexpected resistance; now she was losing.

Sometimes she wakened and knew them; she would ask an anxious question, or smile in the dreamy peace that the heavy anesthetics brought in their wake.

"Stan, dearest—I don't like guns!" He was a little boy again, pleading for a "twenty-two." He would reassure her, and she would suddenly be cool and sane, in the midst of his explanation, and ask him what he was talking about. "You will be good to my dear little Jim?" she asked him, more than once. "Trowbridge has all the papers, Stan. I've left his money all in trust, and you his guardian. We'll take him to Canada this year, Margaret—where it's so deliciously cool. I'd like to plunge into one of those lakes—deep down into the water. I'm so hot!

"I'm sorry it's Shirley, dear," she said once, in the dawn, with a sort of apologetic straightforwardness. "It's a queer family, Stan, and she didn't treat Cuyler fairly—Trowbridge said so. She's pretty, and she loves good times—that's about all. Don't let her be unkind to Jimmie——"

"You must get well, dearest, and take care of us all," Stan said, kneeling beside her, both her hands in his big brown ones. Tears were in his eyes. Margaret, freshly bathed, in white, coming in to relieve him, took his place, on her knees, beside the quiet form.

"I think you had better not talk, Mrs. Cutting," the nurse on duty said uneasily. "We want you to get all the rest you can, dear."

"Would you like me to say some prayers?" Stanley heard Margaret ask quietly. "I think she would like it; I think she would rest better," she reassured the nurse.

"Yes, Margaret, if you will!" the sick woman said eagerly

and faintly. Stanley felt an indescribable emotion as he heard Margaret's voice begin clearly:

"Our Father, who art in Heaven . . ."

He went out into the hall, possessed by the personality of this woman: her fire, her softness, her human, gipsy passions, her moments of simple spiritual exaltation. She had yielded him just a glimpse of what her love might be, last night, and she had shown him, too, how she might hate!

Now, for hours, she had been merely Miss Yorke, dutiful, disciplined, self-effacing, yet the dominant figure in the stricken house, with her keen questions to maids and doctors and nurses, her serious brows bent over a hundred problems, her eloquent brown hands busy with a hundred duties.

Stanley had taken her a cup of soup at midnight; there had been no hysterical protest, no selfish plea that she could not eat. She had finished it readily, with relish, she had said, "Delicious!" and, "Thank you!" with quite her usual manner. But her lovely eyes had been set in rings of pallor; her soft dark hair simply massed, she had been wearing a great warm padded dressing-gown of black Chinese silk; her whole aspect was softened, pathetically broken, he thought, intimate and dear.

Mrs. Cutting died at midnight on the following night, and in the orderly sequence of events that followed Margaret played only a subordinate part. It was Shirley who appeared predominant: a graceful, mournful Shirley, in sweeping fresh black, her rosy, babyish face serious under golden waves of hair, and her voice dropped to a musical key of sympathy and concern.

"Stan and I are to be married soon—very, very quietly, of course!" Margaret heard her say a hundred times. "Yes, isn't it tragic? Just at his happy time!"

How she revelled in it: the setting, the dramatic value of every instant; and how Margaret hated her! It was in vain that the younger woman fought down the jealousy and dislike

that possessed her. Shirley's satisfied air of chatelaine, the use she made of this emergency to knit herself tightly into Stan's life were insufferable.

It was Margaret, of course, who did the real planning, the real arranging; Margaret who saw that the guests, the flowers, the funeral, the maids, were managed without mistakes and without confusion. But it was Shirley who sat beside Stan on the fourth day after the funeral, when the will was read, and Shirley who had sweetly and quickly decided, only a few hours after Mrs. Cutting's death, that Nora and Jim should go down to the farm for an indefinite stay.

"That's where the little chap really belongs, Stan," she argued. "And I think he is almost big enough for real lessons now. Nora babies him terribly!"

Margaret, watching, suffering, waiting, packed the little boy's clothes, went about her duties, looked to Stan for some break—some hint of change. But Stan was held in the strongest net in the world, that of a tenacious, ambitious woman, who is shrewd enough to suspect a man's wavering and clever enough to anticipate and annul any tendency toward frank speaking or an open rupture. Shirley met him at every point: if he was cool toward her, it was because the dear boy had been under such a strain; if he was nervous—well, what could be more natural? In a few weeks he would have the most devoted wife in the world, and she would take care of him, run off with him to Hawaii, perhaps, and make him forget all the worry and sorrow!

She took care to make a hundred allusions, before their friends, to their plans. This was to have been their wedding-day, fancy! But now they must wait, of course, until things were somewhat straightened out; Stan could not get away, even for a fortnight, now.

Meanwhile Shirley had a blissful time ransacking trunks and boxes. One day she gave Margaret a beautiful length of dark blue silk.

"You've been so wonderful, Miss Yorke," Shirley said, estimating the possibilities contained in some old jewelry of jet and pearl as she spoke. "Mr. Crittenden and I both feel deeply grateful to you. And you must surely let us help you as soon as you have made your plans!"

It was that same night, ten days after Mrs. Cutting's death, that Margaret came downstairs to find Stanley in the library, an hour before dinner. Shirley and Joe Cannon were to call for him at seven, to take him off for a quiet meal and a game of bridge at Joe's house. He was already dressed, and had been going over some papers that had arrived only that day from the old family lawyer in New York.

"Stan," the girl said without preamble, coming up to him, an odd creamy pallor on her dark face, one hand laid impulsively upon his coat-lapel, "something has happened. I have to tell you something—I thought I need never tell anyone. But it's no use now, you've got to help me! You'll have to believe me. You won't at first—I can hardly believe it myself, sometimes! But—God help us all!—it's all true."

CHAPTER XIV

STANLEY CRITTENDEN looked up from his papers with an expression of relief; as a matter of fact this was almost his and Margaret's first opportunity of being alone together since the funeral, for the house had been filled with elderly relatives of Mrs. Cutting, with all the following of undertaker's men, florists, callers, doctors, nurses, family friends and tearful old servants that such an event invariably assembles. Margaret had given her room to some old cousins from Portland, and she had been so absorbed in the dismal business of the time, and Stanley so jealously guarded by Shirley, that this moment of finding him alone in the library seemed to both a welcome breathing-spell.

"Yes, I want to talk to you, too," he said, as she sat down opposite him, a slender black figure in the big chair. He pushed away the papers, leaned back and smiled. "You know, of course, that it was my aunt's plan to have you stay on, as a sort of guardian and governess—" he disliked the word, and substituted—"as a sort of guardian angel to the boy?"

Margaret looked confused and surprised and frowned.

"How do you mean, her plan?" she asked, evidently diverted from what she had come to say.

"Well, she had spoken of it to Nora——" Stanley began. But Margaret interrupted him quickly.

"Ah, you mustn't go by Nora, dear old woman! She's loyal, you know, she's utterly biassed!"

"Do you mean that you don't want to stay?" Stanley asked, painfully surprised.

For answer a distressed and perplexed expression came into her mobile face, and for a moment she was silent, frowning faintly.

"Yes, of course I want to stay!" she said then. "But I didn't want you to let Nora prejudice you!"

"It isn't only Nora," Stanley answered, realizing afresh that this woman was a being of infinite surprises. "But on that last night my aunt spoke to me of you, said that you understood the little boy, and that she hoped you would stay with us—with him. I told you that."

Margaret looked thoughtful.

"That's what I came to talk to you about," she said. "Does Mrs. Theobald know that you plan to leave Jim in my care?"

"Shirley?" he said surprisedly. "What's the difference whether she does or not?"

"Well, let us suppose that presently she makes some objection?" Margaret persisted. "I—I want to feel sure!"

"You are certainly hunting for trouble," Stan said disapprovingly. "It is none of her affair, and I can't imagine her interfering."

"The point is," Margaret began, with some difficulty, "that—an obligation—a promise, to the one person in the world who counts with me, makes it necessary for me to know whether or not there is to be a change. It isn't only my own happiness—but it concerns somebody else——"

"You still love him, do you?" Stanley asked, with a significant smile, as she paused. The words astonished her only a little more than they did him; he felt an instant emotion of regret. He seemed unable to keep away from personalities with her.

"Still," she answered, after a second, with a steady glance. "And while I do," she added, "I am happiest here. So I thought if we could settle that question now? . . ."

"There is nothing to settle, if you will stay," Stan said,

feeling disconcerted and a little angered by her self-possession.

"Mrs. Theobald suggested that Nora spoils Jim, and she asked me yesterday——" Margaret was beginning, unconvinced, when Stan, again to his own surprise, interrupted.

"You don't like her, do you? Tell me why you don't like her."

"It doesn't make any difference whether I like her or not," Margaret suggested coldly.

"Yes, but why don't you?"

"She doesn't like me," Margaret presently offered, in true feminine fashion. "And as she is to be your wife and you are my employer," she added, logically, "I naturally——"

"Oh, where do you get all this employer rot—why can't you be friendly?" Stanley interrupted again, impatiently. "I need someone to run Jim and Nora and all the rest of the crew, and you want a job—I take it—that keeps you out of the public eye. You could go a thousand other places, and I couldn't possibly get anyone to fill your place, so if you want to make difficulties, by all means——"

"No, I'm not trying to make difficulties, Stan!" she protested, suddenly penitent and simple again. "It's only—that I want so much to stay, that I'm anxious. Of course I want to take Jim and Nora and go down to 'Uplands.' We could take the log cabin there, if you liked, and not be in your way if you wanted to bring friends!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, stop this meek stuff!" Stan sputtered. "You want to stay, and I tell you I need you—that's enough. What Shirley says doesn't count, do you see? She's excitable," he apologized, "and naturally all this upsetting of our plans has—sort of—upset her."

"Ah, well, it'll be in a few weeks now, I suppose?" Margaret questioned.

"What will—our marriage?" Stanley asked sharply. "I don't know," he answered unencouragingly. And it seemed

to him unfair that she should ask him this so casually, as if it were nothing to her that he was to marry Shirley! "I'm sure I don't know," he repeated, forbiddingly. He looked sternly down at his papers, immediately possessed by an irritating conviction that she was pitying him.

Smiling, anyway, for when he looked up suspiciously, the lingering hint of amusement was still touching the corners of her mouth. She was in black, simple and plain, with the inevitable transparent white at wrists and throat. Her dusky hair waved over her low forehead.

"And now, what did you come to tell me?" he asked.

The blood rushed to her face; she leaned back in her chair, her blue eyes uneasy and her young figure withdrawn even as he knew her spirit was. For a full minute she watched him in silence.

"To answer that were to confess to you," she answered then, in Juliet's words and Juliet's voice, her cheeks reddening afresh. "I needn't, now, if I'm to stay. Not yet, anyway!"

Stan's recognition of this was to leave his chair, to cross to hers, to kneel down, and to encircle her with his arm. Unalarmed she laid one beautiful, sensitive hand upon his shoulder.

"Then confess to me!" he said, trembling and smiling.

"Stanley, what's the matter with us?" Margaret asked. "We—oughtn't to act this way."

"I don't know!" Stanley said, with a little laugh.

She remained in his arm, her reproachful gaze moving slowly over his face.

"Are we going to do this every time we are alone together?" she asked.

"I don't know!" Stanley answered again honestly. "I get mad at you—and then I can't seem to help what I'm doing——"

"You don't love me, and I don't love you," Margaret said, as he stopped short and was silent.

"No, I suppose we don't," he conceded.

"So please—" she warned him, in a voice of fear—"please —I ask you not to—do this sort of thing."

"No," Stan said, after thought. "I won't."

And immediately he tightened his arm about her and brought his face so close to hers that their eyes were not four inches apart, and their fast-beating hearts were pressed against each other. Afterward Stanley went back to his seat, confused and silent, shaken, ashamed, watching her closely, and Margaret leaned her dark head against the back of her chair and shut her eyes.

"But this is—simple insanity!" she said. Stanley remained looking blindly at the papers he was shuffling and moving, his senses in a whirl.

After a pause Margaret got to her feet, and coming close to him she said:

"I'll go down to the farm to Jim tomorrow. I don't think we ought to meet until we can act with—with *some*—— Really," she broke off, in a mere breath of voice, and as if she were talking to herself, in surprise and disgust, "really, I don't know what's come over me!"

"I'll be down at the farm in a few days," Stan promised her, in a businesslike tone, with a brief glance. But immediately he laid down his papers, and caught up her hand, and touched it to his lips. Margaret stood immovable, thought and reason suspended: the world standing still.

"*Well!*" said Shirley's voice, light and laughing, from the doorway.

Margaret and Stan started apart, the man's face instantly brick-red over its smooth tan, the girl's heart hammering with terror. For a second all three were motionless; then Shirley, who looked her prettiest in lemon-colored chiffon, and who carried a furred white coat over her arm, and a great plumed yellow fan, came forward, smiling indulgently.

"Well, is that the way you say good-night to Miss Yorke,

Stan?" she asked, smilingly. "You're late, you bad boy, and Joe's outside simply frothing at the mouth—you know what Emily is when she's kept waiting. Mr. Crittenden's coat, please, Foote," she said, turning back to the doorway, where the butler stood. "I wonder if you'll put this about my shoulders, Stan? Good-night," she said, vaguely nodding toward Margaret, but without a direct look or a name. "Come, Stan! My dear," Margaret heard her add comfortably, as they went away, "I looked at the car today, and I don't believe I could do better, in a closed car, so I told him to hold it. And will you go in tomorrow . . ."

Margaret stood still, as they had left her, alone in the quiet library, her cheeks flaming, her breast rising and falling upon deep and painful breaths. Her thoughts were moving confusedly, her face flaming, and her breath coming short and quick.

"Horrible woman—she saw that!" Margaret said, half-aloud. "What am I thinking of—to act this way!" she thought, her anger far more against herself than Shirley. "I know he's engaged—I must be crazy! She saw that—she'll think we have been flirting—perhaps we have! I'll have to stop *this*, right here and now. She might break her engagement! I wonder if he realizes that it wouldn't make the slightest difference, as far as I am concerned, if she did!"

But if Stanley had any of the same fears they were not destined to be realized. Joe Cannon was waiting in the motor outside, and as Shirley swept into it she turned to look at Stan, over her shoulder, and said with supreme good-humor:

"Oh, you naughty, naughty boy! And the demure Miss Yorke, too! And stupid, stupid me, never to have seen a thing!"

Stanley, getting in after her, and naturally prevented from speaking by the presence of the impatient Joe, felt that

once more she had dexterously placed him in a false position, and once more made him helpless as far as reply or retaliation went.

"No, but, Tanny dear," she said to him later in the same evening, when Joe had been called to the telephone, and Emily, as dummy, had gone out to the pantry to see about refreshments, "Tanny dear, I'm not going to say anything about what I saw tonight—other men have kissed *me*, and she's pretty, and she was very close to your aunt, and all that. But don't you think, since we are to be married so soon —that perhaps it would be as well to give Miss Yorke a hint that she might be making her plans? There's no earthly reason why she should stay in the house while Jim is away— I'm already ordering this poor boy about within an inch of his life," Shirley smiled, as Emily came back.

"Treat 'em rough!" Emily said, picking up her hand.

"Miss Yorke will probably go down to the farm," Stanley could say.

"What for?" Shirley asked sharply, over her own hand.

"Well, why not? She needs a rest," Stan said, with an air of indifference. He felt baffled and nettled. The bidding went on, the play began, and the hand was played when Shirley said lightly:

"Stan, a rest from *what?*"

He looked at her directly; her golden hair, her powdered bare shoulders, her jewels, her smiling babyish face. And Shirley looked back at him steadily and significantly, challenge in her eyes.

Stanley did not answer; the rapid moving of the cards giving him his excuse for the omission. He saw the color creep into Shirley's face and that her eyes narrowed dangerously. But nothing more was said between them until he had taken her to her own house. Then she walked into the drawing-room, saying to him, over her shoulder:

"Could he come in and talk to Shirley?"

Stanley, extremely uncomfortable in the sudden need to summon all his forces, followed her in. It must be now or never—it must be now or never——

"Tanny," Shirley said, flinging aside her wraps and lighting a cigarette, as he knelt to touch a match to the already-laid wood fire, "didn't you like me very much tonight? Did I do something to make you cross? Tell me."

"Nothing in the world!" Stanley answered, taken at a disadvantage and quite aware of it.

"You don't think I mind your kissing that pretty girl, Stan?" Shirley asked. "If he has kissed her, he won't deny it," she thought, "and if that performance this evening was the worst, he'll say so."

Stanley said nothing, and she drew her own conclusions.

"My dear, do you suppose I haven't seen that you like her?" she asked good-naturedly. "Go on liking her. I hope you'll always be friends."

She had carried away his hat and coat, and now came to the big chair where he was seated, and established herself upon the arm of it, almost in his arms.

"Dear me," Shirley mused, "how well I know her type! She's really a trouble-maker, you know," she told him, amusedly, "the sort of woman who is just too good, and too unfortunate, and too wronged generally, to be wholesome!"

"She doesn't seem to me that sort," Stanley said, nettled.

"No, dear," Shirley conceded him, always with the air of enlightening a very small boy. "Because she's pretty, and she flirts with you! And she lets you kiss her, does she?" she asked, dreamily, with a smile he heard rather than saw, for her face was against his hair.

"For heaven's sake, Shirley!" Stanley said, getting somewhat roughly out of his chair and going to stand at the hearth, where he lighted a cigarette.

Shirley, quite unruffled, slid into the seat, opened her own case, lighted a cigarette, puffed it, blew out and flung

away the match, all without removing her smiling, quizzical look from his face.

"Give me your solemn word of honor that you never kissed her," she said superbly tolerant. And as Stanley, miserably confused, scowled without replying, she laughed. "Exactly!" she said. "She is the soul of honor, of course, and I'm not to criticize her, but a few weeks after your aunt's death, and just before your own marriage, she is letting you kiss her! My dear Stan, do you think I'm angry? I don't care *that* about Miss Yorke!" and Shirley snapped her fingers contemptuously. "But doesn't it show you the kind of woman she is?" she finished shrewdly.

"My dear girl, I don't get your drift," Stanley said, recovering from the momentary discomfort into which her manner had thrown him. "Here you are enjoying yourself with the most ridiculous statements—I don't get you."

"Yes, but swear that you never have kissed her," Shirley pursued, relentlessly.

Stanley, suddenly grave, lighted his own cigarette.

"We'll get nowhere with this sort of absurdity," he said coldly. "To answer that would be to insult both Miss Yorke and myself. If I *did* want to kiss her, I wouldn't consider it a hanging matter. But I don't, and that's all there is to it!"

"He *has* kissed her," Shirley inferred, keenly surprised. "I wonder how often?—Did your aunt know anything about this?" she asked, aloud.

"About what?" Stanley asked irritably.

"About this little affair between you and virtuous, dignified Miss Yorke!" Shirley said, and burst into laughter.

Stanley was too deeply offended to reply; he shrugged his shoulders, and there was a pause.

"I hate this kind of thing!" he said then, icily, grinding out the stump of his cigarette. "I wish you'd kindly change the subject."

"My dear boy, do you think *I* like it?" Shirley asked

heatedly. "Suppose you had walked in here tonight and found *me* in some man's arms? Would you feel that you had some right to complain or wouldn't you? I don't care about Miss Yorke—if she has any decency she'll get another position and go out of our lives! But I have to have faith in you, Stan. It's terrible to feel that you're carrying on with —well, with *servants*. Don't interrupt me, I know she's a lady, I know she's far above her station," Shirley said, getting to her feet and coming close to him, her face pale with passion, "but she is taking advantage of her position, and you can't deny it! Tanny dear," she went on, her tone suddenly changing, "I understand exactly. You're all tired out, and you're unreasonable. I caught you kissing that pretty girl tonight, and you think I'm going to scold you. I'm not in the least annoyed! You don't suppose I expect you to stop liking other women because of me? You go home and get a good night's rest, and *forget* it. But, Stan, don't expect me to like, or to approve, a woman who will carry on that way with a man who is about to be married! No decent woman could do it. She stamps herself——"

"My dear girl, what you think of Miss Yorke is nothing to me!" Stanley interrupted hotly. "And what we both think of her is nothing to her. But I assure you that you're absolutely wrong! She——"

"Yes, she's wonderful, and she's beautiful, and she's everything!" Shirley conceded, interrupting him. "But *you* let her alone, dear. I'm not cross, and I'm not jealous, but it's for your own good. Why, as far as I'm concerned you can do what you like, with this woman or any other," Shirley assured him generously. "But it's beneath your own dignity, Stan. You tell her," Shirley said lightly, smiling up into his face with her innocent, determined eyes, "that in our class gentlemen don't play with pretty ladies when they are engaged to be married! Before I'd let *her* have you, Stan," Shirley finished, always with a half-merry, half-saucy air,

"I'd fight it in the courts! Yes, I would!" she added, quickly and seriously, as he laughed. "She shan't ruin your life and mine, too!"

Well, it was said in fun, of course. It was a lovers' quarrel, Stanley told himself, walking home, fifteen minutes later, through the darkness of the lane. She had made him kiss her, and say that he loved her, and, not satisfied, she had made him repeat the kiss, "kiss her pretty." And she had insisted that he get into a chair and let her get into his lap, for "nice lovings." Stanley, staring over the golden head in utter bleakness and bewilderment of spirit, had performed these obligations as best he might. No, he was not cross at her, forget it, he had said. Certainly he wasn't cross; *forget it.*

But, when he was alone, he could not forget it. That little hint of fight, how like her, how entirely characteristic of her actions, all her life long, that was! Notoriety, controversy, fight—these things held no horrors for her. Stanley hated to remember the hint of deadly, serious earnest that had lain behind her airy, smiling manner as she mentioned them.

He had a sudden uncomfortable recollection of the pickle poor Buck Castleman had gotten into in college: the lawyer's letter, launched upon him like a thunderbolt, had been a sickening thing in its dispassionate phraseology. And old Castleman, rather than have the boy, who was innocent, face the mud of the thing, had given this unscrupulous forty-year-old woman some eighteen thousand dollars. Whew! said Stanley, in the dark.

Foote admitted him to a darkened house; Miss Yorke had retired, he opined. Stanley was conscious of a wish to see her and to tell her that that little contretemps in the library, four hours ago, was of no consequence. But she had gone to bed. Nothing for it but bed himself and his anxious thoughts. And when, after restless and miserable hours, he came down late to breakfast, Foote told him that Miss Yorke

was gone. She and Jim had left for the farm, with Tony, at half-past seven. Tony was the aged Mexican who drove up from Cupertino every morning with the milk.

Shirley, however, appeared as he was moodily loitering over his coffee, undecided as to whether he would follow Margaret to the farm—he had duties at the farm, he remembered—or keep his appointment with his aunt's San Francisco lawyer at ten o'clock.

The morning was overcast, and now the rain began, steadily and darkly, pattering noisily upon the big-leaved plants of the terrace, dripping-dripping-dripping outside of the dining-room windows. Shirley, spattered and breathless and laughing, came flashing in through the thickest of it; Stanley heard her giving Foote her umbrella and had not time to reach the door before she stood there.

She wore the smartest of tweed suits and a big fox fur; her big dog was her escort, and when she had made him lie down she gave Stanley a butterfly kiss and settled herself opposite him at the table.

"Going into town in all this downpour, you poor boy?" she asked smilingly. She was radiant, her cheeks softly rosy, her lips brightly red, every hair in place, and the scents of powders and colognes floating about her. "Yes, I'll have coffee, Carrie," she told the maid pleasantly. "I couldn't bear to be cross with my Tanny," she added, when they were alone, "and so I came running froo de nassy rain to tell my big boy I lubbed him!"

This, for a few infatuated weeks, had been the type of their discourse; Stanley could hardly control his facial muscles sufficiently even to smile at it now. She was just what she had always been: pretty, engaging, appealing. And she had him in a trap.

"Let's be good friends again," she suggested brightly. "You said some naughty things to me, and I said some to you, but that doesn't mean that we can't make up, does it?

I don't mind lovers' quarrels, Stan," she added, dimpling at him, "because making up is such fun!"

Half an hour later she parted from him in the same tone: brightly friendly and casual. Stanley left her at her door and drove the roadster into town, his heart and mind in such a state of bewilderment and doubt as he had never known in his healthy unexacting life before. The details of the day's business were only so many reminders that his inheritance was the real cause of Shirley's attachment; everything suggested her and his bondage to her.

The rain fell in torrents, straight, heavy, unceasing. Stan lunched at his club, met Shirley and some friends for tea, and dressed for an informal dinner party, at which she shone with all her accustomed piquancy and charm. She was merry about her approaching wedding, and while she adroitly avoided occasions of being alone with Stan, she was more than ordinarily demonstrative with him in public.

"Mine!" said her every triumphant word and look.

CHAPTER XV

THE next morning it was still raining heavily; it rained all day. Stanley, fretted and anxious, after hours of irresolution, telephoned Shirley that he must talk to her and took her to lunch.

And sitting over an inconspicuous table in the Palace Court, he summoned all his courage and suggested to her frankly that he try to dissect for her the feelings that troubled and puzzled him.

But Shirley was not interested in his feelings; she laughed in a sophisticated fashion and assured him that he was experiencing all the tremors of the blushing bride.

"You've never been married before, Stan," she reminded him, "but I have! Everyone feels that way. Do think of somebody besides yourself, for a change, and stop *worrying!*"

"Here's the thing," Stanley said patiently and clumsily, man-fashion. "Do we really love each other?"

"Why, certainly we do, darling!" Shirley answered reassuringly, as she nodded and smiled to a friend several tables away.

"I remember Philip, when he was in love with Julia," Stanley pursued seriously. "When she had flu he almost died, he was so worried. He told me he'd kill himself if——"

"Yes, dear," Shirley interrupted smoothly, in the abstracted tone she would have used to a small child. "And if I got flu you'd say the same! Please—" she said, annoyed and bored—"*please* drop that silly subject once and for all! Now about tomorrow night——"

"I really ought to go down to the farm tomorrow night," he said sourly, angered at her manner.

Shirley looked up from her salad alertly.

"Is that woman there?"

"If you mean Margaret Yorke, of course she's there! She and the kid stay there, now."

"Stan, honestly, do you think it's fair to me——" Shirley was beginning, when the man interrupted her roughly.

"Oh, for God's sake, drop it! I tell you she's nothing to me. Come down yourself, if you don't believe me."

Shirley considered this, lips pursed and eyes narrowed.

"I can't tomorrow," she decided. "But I might Saturday."

"Who could you bring?" Stanley asked, ill-tempered because he had suggested it at all.

"Oh, I'll get somebody! I don't want to come down alone until we're married," Shirley said virtuously. "And, sweetheart," she added, in her softest and prettiest mood, "we don't have to have Miss Yorke always with us, do we? Think how you'd feel if it was some man *I* liked——."

"She looks out for Nora and the kid, Shirley," Stan said shortly.

"Yes, I know, but if she's always at the ranch," said Shirley, with some heat, "it'll simply spoil the place for me!"

Stanley made no answer; he was too angry to speak, and she saw it. For the rest of the meal she was her sweetest self, and she left him with her usual upward, pretty smile and a kiss from her gloved finger-tips. Smart, furred, and with his orchids pinned on her breast, and the new gold bag dangling in her white-gloved fingers, she went happily and complacently upon her way. Stanley went back to his office.

The winter rain fell and fell, etching the city with straight grey misty lines, flooding gutters, and dancing inches above the sidewalks with the violence of its fall. And so another cold, early evening shut down, and another rainy morning found Stan at his club, tired after a restless night, and more apprehensive and disturbed in his mind than ever.

Suddenly, without premeditation, he rushed straight from

his breakfast into the cold, wet, bleak air, jumped into the roadster, and headed for the ranch.

The roads were heavy, framed in running streams of brown; there was a sad, earthy smell in the damp atmosphere, and a sad gloomy twilight over the world. The shabby eucalyptus of the Peninsula had shed drifts of wet, discolored leaves; waterproofed school-children, mad with freedom and fresh air, splashed in brown puddles that were pocked with raindrops, small chimneys sent wavering scarfs of blue smoke into the heavy sky and dripping trees.

But at Sunnyvale Stanley saw with a sudden lifting of his heart that the lead-colored clouds were massing and moving over the Santa Clara valley, and that toward Los Gatos and the south there lay, through a long gap in the mountains, a band of uncertain lemon-colored light. The rain had broken to a mere drizzle, a heavy mist; here and there a wandering gust shook a tree sharply, and the drenched leaves stood up freshly, relieved of some part of their load of water.

And when he turned the car in at "Uplands" a shaft of watery sunlight suddenly enveloped the old place, twinkling upon wet roofs and paths, shining in the shining drops that fell from vines and trees, and piercing the dove-blue column of smoke that was rising from the big chimney.

"Home!" his heart said, warmed and reassured. The golden, glittering light strengthened; was dancing and flooding everywhere. Hang came out of the kitchen and greeted him with the delight of the artist who feels his kindest critic in his power, and Nora, beaming, told him that Miss Yorke and the young boy had just this minute's minute stepped out, the way they could see the new pigs, the creatures, and get a breatheen of the air.

Stanley, deep peace possessing him, changed into rough clothes and went after them. The uncertain morning light was sending long sweet shafts over "Uplands" as he traced Margaret and the child from barns to farrowing-sheds, and

up into the place where the empty pool was filling with a drift of dead wet leaves. Long before he reached them he could hear their exultant voices.

They were some hundred yards above the pool, up the stream. Battersby was with them; all three were in great excitement over the course of the Quitito, whose brown, flooded waters had been choked and diverted, under the bridge, by fallen trees, branches, twigs, all the rubbish that had been washed into its swollen course in the late storm.

The clayey stream fought its way through, crooked, aborted, channelling itself a hundred illicit pathways and pools among the bushes and rocks; it was rushing fiercely, topped here and there with dirty yellow foam.

"Oh, hello!" Margaret said, eagerly, giving him her cold, wet hand and a radiant smile from her glowing face. "Will you look at this villain river! Battersby says that it'll tear the whole basin out and ruin the tennis-court. We just found it!" And then, close beside him, she gave him a swiftly changed smile and asked in an undertone: "You're tired—is everything all right?"

And suddenly it seemed to Stan that he was not tired, and that everything was supremely all right. He smiled at her, radiant and glowing and friendly, and thought what a soothing and wonderful thing a sweet, simple, friendly woman could be when a man was weary and depressed. The nearness of her, the restful sweetness of her, brought his old smile to his brown face and reduced him to the silence that, with him, meant utter content.

A memorable morning followed, when he and she, aided by Jim, by Battersby, and one of the Mexicans, changed the course of the Quitito. The task was herculean, it involved shouting, running, dragging, struggling, constant immersions, much slipping and stumbling. The stream had been diverted, years before, to fill the pool. Now the plan was to

turn it back, while it was flooded at least, and so save the cemented pool and the courts below.

Presently Stanley threw off his old hunting sheepskin coat, and Margaret her sweater; both were glowing, panting, and soaked to the skin. The sunlight was strengthening every minute, and the diverted creek, muddy at first as it moved between the unfamiliar rocks and bushes, cleared gradually, showed opaque patches in its quiet spaces, and tore bubbling and frothy upon its new-old way. It left behind it a waste of trampled and torn mud, a drying course, ugly pools connected by languid trickles, and the heaped bushes, wreckage and leaves that Tony had piled roughly for some future conflagration.

By the time this was done it was one o'clock, and after the briefest of ablutions Margaret, Jim and Stanley went in to the most delicious luncheon Hang had ever cooked: to steaks and salad and brown rolls and baked onions, and to meringues upon which, as Stanley frankly admitted, he ate himself "out of shape."

"And now," Margaret said afterward, when, admittedly tired and even a little stiff, she had established herself in a big chair before the sitting-room fire, "now I wonder if we might have a little talk?"

Stanley, who had been enchanted to find her in the bright and friendly mood, saw nevertheless that she had adopted a friendly, impersonal air with it. There was to be no philandering today, there was to be, in her manner, no reminder of the cataclysmic ending of their last tête-à-tête.

Rain, brown and steady and unrelenting, was falling again, and they had lighted a fire. It was delicious to them all to rest here in the shabby room and the twilight afternoon, with the blazing wood for their only illumination, and the rain-slashed acres of meadow and forest shutting them away from the world.

Jim, superficially sponged by Nora, clad in his little crash wrapper and conceded a rest in Margaret's arms rather than the orthodox nap, was sprawled luxuriously upon her knees. Stanley saw her stoop now and then to kiss the tawny wave of the child's hair, and saw Jim raise heavy blue eyes, and a pipe-stem of small arm and kiss her sleepily in return. A round little leg rolled idly; Jim's lashes sank and sank. He was asleep.

"There's something I want to tell you—something I wanted to tell you on Tuesday night," Margaret began.

"When we were interrupted?" Stanley suggested, watching her. He loved to see the glorious color flame up into her face and the half-laughing, half-reproachful, wholly pleading look she gave him.

"When we were interrupted," she assented, with her grave smile.

The demure repetition of his phrase enchanted Stanley, and he grinned.

"But the satisfaction of knowing that you are human!" he said.

"Oh, *that!*" She flushed again brightly. "That at least," she confessed. And suddenly and childishly alarmed, she broke off quickly: "Do *please* let's be sensible! I've got something to tell you that's very hard to tell anyone," she began after a second. "Perhaps I should have told you long ago——"

"I assure you that I'll regard it as sacred," Stanley said, lighting his cigarette and watching her as she paused.

"When I ask you to regard it as sacred, you'll know I've lost faith in you!" Margaret told him, with a sorry smile. "It's always hard to admit that one has made mistakes," she added, feeling her way slowly. "This—the first part, is about mine. I think I told you that I lost my mother when I was sixteen. We were both actresses—or she was, and I meant to be. It's a lonely life. My heart almost broke when

I had to go on without her. Two years later, the day I was eighteen, I was married. You knew that?"

"I suspected it," Stanley said, intensely grave. "You told me practically that."

Margaret was silent, her eyes on the fire, her thin brown nervous fingers knotting and unknotting themselves.

"Is it so hard?" Stanley asked, sympathetically.

"It's *deathly* hard!" she said, with a glance. And immediately she went on: "For almost all girls—young girls, marriage, at the first, is oddly disillusioning, I suppose," she said. "The mystery—the miracle—the metamorphosis that we have been dreaming about all our lives, doesn't take place. There are the same trifles that we thought ourselves done with, the same pettinesses and disappointments and personalities, even in the happiest marriage.

"But my marriage plunged me straight into hell. I don't know what sort of life makes a man like my husband. I don't think he had ever known a decent woman before, although there had been a score of women in his life. His standards, his ideas, his views of women were—simply indescribable. He was an animal—a clean, well-groomed, somewhat witty and very rich animal, that was all. Drink, food, sleep, and me, that was what life meant to him. He didn't listen to me, but if I happened to look pretty, he would lean over my shoulder in a theatre box, or put his arm about me in the motor car, and murmur perfectly incoherent words to me, no matter how much interested I was in what I was saying. He thought jewels and silk stockings could buy forgiveness for—anything. My God—my God—my God!"

The last words she said in a whisper, and she put her free hand up to her face. Stanley felt something twist within him, as he saw the thin fingers pressed against her eyes.

"I was remembering the horrible pink rooms in which we lived," Margaret said, presently, looking at him for a second before beginning again. "The horrible trays of horrible food!

I lived in a daze. I had lost my mother, I missed her cruelly, I had never put anyone in her place, never talked to any women. The horrors of those first months almost killed me. It wasn't only his polished, pleasant cruelty and coarseness. It was that I had nothing—nothing else! No companionship, no talk of books and home and friends. Just a man's money, and his admiration, and the dinners and dances and theatres, the hideous, hideous standard of such a man's world!

"I had liked to get up early and walk through the quiet streets; that's the sweetest hour, in New York, winter or summer. Streets like Third Avenue, or the Drive, are just teeming with adventures, little tragedies and comedies, then."

"I know!" Stanley said, clearing his throat, moving his arm to touch her hand.

"Instead, we breakfasted at about eleven," Margaret went on, speaking always in a slow and somewhat uncertain fashion, as if she were trying to find words, "the sort of lazy, silk-dressed breakfast that some women love but that I hate! This lasted until two, perhaps. Then we drove, and bought things——

"I used to be ashamed, before the sales-girls in the shops," she added, suddenly, after a pause. "It was all so obvious —the working-girl who had landed a man with money! Well, then we had tea—cocktails it was, of course. And then we dressed, and had dinner, and more drink—he used, my husband I mean, he used to really look forward to the effect of that drinking and stuffing, in warm rooms, and with music playing, and with the people he knew coming and going.

"It seems too simple to say, to a perfectly healthy girl of nineteen: 'Well, there was the library, there were studies, walks, books, lectures, concerts——!' I know there were. But it was no use! I grew actually sick with despair, I couldn't shake it off. And then he got furious with me, tired of me— he would disappear for days, for actual weeks at a time— there were other women, he didn't hesitate to tell me that.

"So finally I did what was inevitable, I suppose. I told him I must be free, and I took his money—I hate to remember that—and I went away, disappeared. He told me that I would be back as soon as my five thousand was gone, but I've never seen him since that horrible hot Sunday. I don't know where he is, even!"

"All that is just about what I suspected, Margaret," Stanley said, clearing his throat, when she stopped short.

Logs burned on in the smoked old fireplace, with a soothing crackle, rain drummed softly on the low wooden roof. Jim slept on soundly, Margaret's arms about him. The lamplight made little glowing pools of brightness in the shabby farmhouse room; outside, in the darkening afternoon, the great branches of trees moved restlessly, creaking and dripping. To Stanley it was as if they three were shut alone into an enchanted world.

"Nothing disgraceful in all that, Margaret!" he said.

"Ah, but that isn't half!" she answered, with a rueful smile. "I took his money, as I said. And I went to a tiny place in New Jersey, where an old woman I knew lived. She had been a theatrical dressmaker; she was an angel. I hadn't been there for two weeks before I knew that what I had suspected, what I had feared, was true. There was going to be—a baby."

She began to tremble very much, and Stanley reached out, and took her brown hand, and held it tightly.

"My one fear," Margaret went on, in a quick, anxious voice, "was that my husband would know. Even before my boy was born, I was only afraid that somehow—somehow—his father would get hold of him and make such a man of him as he was himself, Stan. I lived on where I was, I changed my name—and my darling, *my darling*, was born in Trenton, and spent the first adorable months of his life in our little Burlington house! Stan, Stan, what a precious thing he was—he made up for everything, and a thousand times more!

"Well, then, winter came, and there was a flu epidemic. It came to us, and my old guardian and friend, Mrs. Packer, was one of the first to go. I nursed her, I fretted over my boy. I was afraid, Stan, and I got the punishment of people who fear."

"You lost your baby? Margaret, then that's your sorrow?" Stanley asked, in a hushed voice.

"No," she answered slowly, not meeting his eyes. And he saw that her whole body was trembling violently, her eyes were brimming, and her lips shaking. "But one day I knew that I was ill—ill with that frightful malignant form that lasted only a few days," she said. "I had seen it over and over again!"

"Tell me, where is the child, then?" Stanley asked.

"Help me!" she faltered suddenly, her strange look leaving his face slowly and fastening itself upon the sleeping boy in her arms. "Don't—don't make me sorry I told you!"

"Jim!" Stanley whispered, in stupefaction.

Margaret did not answer in words. But she rested her young cheek against the child's splendid mop of hair and shut her eyes, and Stanley saw bitter tears start from beneath the lowered thick lashes, and that her beautiful mouth was quivering. He remained silent, staring at her blankly, unable to move or speak.

Her violence had half-awakened the child. Now, with her face still stained by the fast-falling tears, and her breath coming and going spasmodically, she rose, and carried him to the big couch beside the fire. Stanley watched her settle the beautiful, heavy little form, and tuck a soft old shawl about the small figure. Afterward she knelt beside him, pressing one of the limp little hands against her hot cheeks, drinking in the baby beauty as if she could never satisfy her thirsty eyes.

Then, meeting Stanley's gaze for the first time, she came back to her chair and sat down in it again. She pushed from

her forehead the thick soft disordered hair, and something in its unbecoming plainness, and in the pathos of the frankly reddened eyes, went straight to his heart.

"Now you know!" she said simply. "Jim's mine. He's the little baby that came to me in that hospital in Trenton—he's what has kept me here, what would have kept me here through fire and water! He doesn't know it, but he's had his mother to watch him, and to guard him, and to teach him his prayers, just as—just as—any boy should!"

Her voice broke, she was crying again, and Stan came over to kneel beside her chair and put his arms about her. Margaret laid her head against his breast, and linked one arm about his neck, and it seemed to him quite natural to hold her so, relaxed and spent.

"You see, I happened to know old Mr. Trowbridge, Mrs. Cutting's lawyer," Margaret resumed, after a space. "And he had told me once of her anxiety to adopt a child. So when I knew how desperately ill I was—the hospital was overcrowded, Stan, and I could get neither doctor nor nurse, I telephoned him. He came at once. Jim was fretting in his crib, poor baby!—he hadn't even been fed, and I signed him away—I had to. I thought that in a few hours I would be gone where I couldn't feed him and dress him—my own baby. He was so little, Stan, and the world seemed so big! Trowbridge sent his housekeeper to get Jim that night and to see what she could do for me, but I had sent Jim to a neighbor's, and she found him there, and they told her that I had been taken off to the hospital, unconscious and dying—and that was true.

"I hardly grasped it all, as I began to get well. Something had snapped inside me, and I dragged on for weeks and weeks, knowing that my baby was alive somewhere, but too weak and too sad to care much—to make any effort. It seemed to me that the world was full of death and sickness and separation—and so it was. But after awhile, after weeks of that,

I did drag myself to New York, and I saw Trowbridge, and we talked. There was no possibility of my old work for me, my marriage and illness had ended everything in that direction, and there was just one thing in the world I wanted—my baby, of course. So Trowbridge arranged that I was to come west, and he gave me a letter to your aunt. You see, it's very simple. He said that he knew me to be a gentlewoman, and able to do her secretarial work, and entirely accustomed to small children.

"It was just what she wanted; I'd hardly hoped as much as that. I assure you that I could hardly believe it myself! I got to San Francisco here on a Thursday, and on Friday I dressed very carefully, plainly, you know, to look like a secretary."

"With glasses!" Stanley said, dazed.

"You remember the glasses? Well, I came down to see Mrs. Cutting. My baby was asleep in a gorgeous perambulator on the side porch; it was an exquisite June day. We talked, and she found out that I spoke French and Italian, and had had some music, and that I wrote a good hand, and had references. And so it was arranged, and then she walked with me to the coach, and I saw my Jim—I hadn't seen him for four months! She didn't tell me that day, or for weeks, that he was adopted.

"So the next night I found myself putting him to bed, Stan, my own little soft fat Jim, who wanted to kick and roll and shout just in his old way! I never dreamed of keeping the secret so long. But to tell it would have been to break my oath to Trowbridge, and to break your aunt's heart, and perhaps to expose Jim to his father again, and I didn't dare risk that. I told you that Mother and I were in the theatre, didn't I? Well, I was in terror that some newspaper story, some picture of my face, would bring Jim's father on our trail again."

"He doesn't even know there was a baby?" Stan asked,

after a pause in which he continued to stare dazedly at the agitated, beautiful face so close to his own.

"Oh, no, he never will!" Margaret said fervently.

"And all this time——?" the man marvelled.

"All this time I have been taking care of him!" she exulted, half laughing, half ready for tears. "Nora knows," she added, suddenly. "When he was ill, two or three months after I came, I had to tell her. And she has helped me in a million ways, darling old woman! And so there—that's the story."

She leaned back, watching his face. And Stan looked at her with new eyes. Her whole position had altered in these few minutes, and altered in a fashion that made her a hundred times more interesting to him. Instead of his aunt's silent, stormy-eyed, unresponsive companion, he found himself studying with new eyes this passionate, wronged, courageous girl, whose mother-love had taken her through such bitter waters.

"Playing one more part?" he asked.

"My big part at last!" she assented, with a quick smile.

"But you—the mother of that baby, Margaret!" he said. "I can't realize it, yet. You would do all this for him?"

"And a thousand times more!" she said quickly. "It's like that, with a child, Stan. There's nothing so wonderful!"

And for a few minutes she remained quietly resting against his shoulder, her thoughts far away, her breath growing quieter and quieter, and her eyes absently fixed upon space.

"I like you so much. I admire you so much!" Stanley said, irrelevantly. His words seemed to arouse her suddenly to a sense of her position, and she sat erect and pushed him away. He took his own chair again, smiling, and a little confused.

"I—I see no reason why we should not *like* each other," he said, as she regarded him with troubled eyes and did not speak.

"No, there's no reason why we should not be friends!" she agreed quickly.

"You know, I used to think you were so horribly unapproachable, Margaret," Stanley said, in the delicious first stage of intimacy at last. "I had no idea that you would ever really like me or I you!"

"I like you thoroughly," she told him, in the same business-like tone she had used before. "And I hope we will always be friends! You see, your being Jim's guardian——"

"And he's *yours!*" Stanley marvelled, musing.

"That's what has kept me here, of course, in spite of Shirley's hints," Margaret explained, anxiously watching him.

"I'll fix her—she's awfully good-natured, really," Stan assured her.

"Once you are married, you could arrange to have us stay here at the farm, perhaps?" Margaret suggested. "She won't want to be here, very often. Or Jim and I could go away? He will have that magnificent allowance until he is twenty-one, and we can live anywhere."

"It gives me the *greatest* satisfaction to feel that we are friends and that we understand each other," Stanley said, out of a silence. "I knew that you didn't like me—at least, I felt it, and I used to think you sort of misjudged me—you thought I was a bounder, somehow——"

He paused, and Margaret, who had listened to the beginning of this speech with a smile, softened suddenly at its close.

"Well, I did," she confessed in turn. "I was troubled, and frightened, and not very strong, and I didn't know how things were coming out—your aunt might have sent me away at any minute, you know." Of course I wouldn't have gone, without Jim. But it would have killed her to have me take Jim!"

Stanley reached for her hand and held it again.

"But now we're good friends?"

"Oh, I hope so!"

She looked so fluttered, at once so uneasy and so yielding, that he laughed as he asked:

"Well, what are you afraid of?"

"I wasn't extremely proud of that scene in the library the other night," Margaret answered, bravely facing him, after a moment. "I felt terrible about it. And I thought that perhaps—perhaps if you and I could just avoid the occasions of discussing our own personal affairs more than we have to——

"I think this baby is waking up," she added nervously, anxious to escape, "and I'd rather he should, he'll sleep better tonight! I'll get Nora."

She went away, and after a few minutes Nora came in, to find Jim climbing over a chair like a marmoset, and carried off the child. Margaret did not return. Stan threw himself on the couch and dozed for an hour, and then wandered out to the sun-porch, to find the child busy with stone blocks.

The rain was still falling—falling. Nora had lighted a coal-oil stove, and the air was warm, but the encircling windows gave a desolate view of spattered farm-buildings and dripping trees, and Stanley felt chilled and depressed.

"Where's Miss Yorke, Nora?"

"She's laying down, Mr. Crittenden. She's asleep, I should say. She ast would I tell you good-bye," said Nora mildly, "and Battersby would write you about the new apricots."

"I'm not going up to town!" Stanley said shortly. He went to his room, and started a fire in the air-tight stove, and began to fuss with his bureau and dresser and desk. He felt delightfully thrilled by those murmured confidences, by that hour of relaxation, by Margaret's extraordinary story.

She was a lovely woman, and she had a strange history. It delighted him to think that she had told him the truth; he felt the warmth and softness of mood that follow confidences between a man and a woman, on a rainy afternoon, beside a fire.

Their next meeting would be significant, whatever it was.

Stan anticipated it a hundred times, pausing in his work of straightening and changing, smiling into space. She was a delightful girl; he liked her. She had had grit, to fight for that kid! And he had had no right to tease her with his attentions. That mild insanity that had seized them both on Tuesday night. No, she was too fine for that.

He walked about the farm, in a softening drizzle, at half-past five. No sign of her. He stopped at Battersby's cottage, rather aimlessly; the pulpy baby and his mother were there, but nobody else. Stanley went back to the house and changed into dry white flannels, his heart beating harder and faster every minute, and a curious nervousness, exhilaration, fear and delight possessing him.

CHAPTER XVI

THERE was a roaring great fire in the sitting-room, when he came into it at half-past six, but no other light. Margaret, in a frail black lace gown that made her gipsy coloring more brilliant than ever, was in a big chair, telling Jim, who wore his brief pajamas, a bedtime tale.

Instantly Stan came to his senses. This was just a commonplace scene, and all his half-formed dreams were bubbles. The placid glance she gave him, the unruffled calm with which she continued her story, made him feel suddenly foolish.

When dinner was announced Jim curvetted away to bed, and Margaret took the head of the table; Stanley noted the firmness of the thin, brown hand that served the soup. There were old gold and enamel earrings dangling almost to her shoulders, her dark hair was quaint in its plainness, in it she wore a tortoise-shell comb that caught the light through its carved fan.

"I thought you were going back to the city?" she said, presently.

"I don't often go back on Fridays," Stanley said, nettled.

Margaret did not answer; her mouth deepened at the corners a trifle. She knew that by mere silence she was playing a trump.

"Shirley is coming down tomorrow," said Stan, scoring a point in his turn.

He was gratified to see her look a trifle dismayed and surprised.

"I'm sorry if you mind," he said politely.

The girl flushed hotly.

"Why should I mind?" she asked quickly. "I was just thinking of getting a list to Tony before he goes down with the milk tomorrow," she added.

"I see," Stanley said, smiling, and lighting a cigarette as Hang carried away the dessert. "It occurs to me that you and I have never been down here alone before," he said, after a pause.

Margaret managed a supremely indifferent and yet thoughtful look.

"I can't remember!" she said, leaving the table. She went through a swinging door into the kitchen, whence Stanley heard her voice and the hilarious accents of the cook. He followed lazily: plans for the week-end were under way, and Hang was opening pantries and ice-boxes and estimating supplies.

Shoo-ah, he had ham. Shoo-ah, plenty cheese, plenty chocolate. Maybe Tony get him two poun' pork—shoo-ah. Hang, toothless and beaming, in his white linen, with his interrupted dinner in an unappetizing mess of chicken-bones and rice at the end of the immaculate kitchen table, ran eagerly from locker to tin and poured forth a stream of what he believed to be English.

"But imagine us managing half that much in Chinese!" Margaret commented mildly, as she followed Stan back to the sitting-room. The man immediately, and without question, got out a card-table; this was the signal for Russian Bank, and Margaret entered into the game with characteristic ardor. They were finishing a third game when the clock struck ten, and she would not begin another. But she lingered, in her big chair, while Stanley put the table aside. "You got a good sleep this afternoon," she reminded him. "But I'm dead—after our terrific day!"

Still, she did not move, and Stanley dropped into the chair opposite and lighted a cigarette. Outside, the rain and wind beat furiously through the night; there was occasionally a

high, whining sound in the old chimney, and water spattered and splashed incessantly from the eaves. They could hear the creaking of the great trees, and the wet swish of water-laden boughs. Inside, the clock ticked placidly, and there was a lazy snapping and crumbling in the glowing heart of the fire that was banked in trembling red and gold.

Stanley felt deliciously relaxed; he felt he could sit forever in the presence of this black-clad woman, dreaming beside this fire. The memory of the afternoon came back to him, and, half shutting his eyes, he tried to imagine her moving through the trying and terrible times she had described to him. She had not done so badly for her son, after all, he thought. Neither she nor the child need ever want, with even reasonable management. They might have to lie low, mused Stan, while the brute of a husband and father was roaming the world. Such a man might make things extremely awkward for a little son who had inherited a comfortable fortune. But she would be equal to the situation.

He looked forward to a deep, continued friendship with her. She would always confide in him and consult him, and he would always help her. She was dreaming now, as he was, and was apparently unconscious of the smile he turned toward her.

Stan studied the relaxed slender figure, the locked fingers, the slightly-dropped head, and the seriously-drawn brows. Here in the quiet of the old sitting-room, she seemed in exactly the setting that fitted her. And yet he thought he would like to see her in black velvet, too, in some long, splendid drawing-room—one might build such a room all across the western front of the house in Burlingame—with Aunt Hat's pearls about the brown, round beautiful column of her throat.

Suddenly he had put out his hand, and, one of her own being laid for a second on the arm of her chair, his fingers covered hers.

She looked up, startled.

"Why?"

"Just thinking—how proud you make me by all that you told me this afternoon!" Stanley said.

Margaret answered only by a rather strained smile. She did not withdraw her hand, but Stanley felt a sudden motion in the captured fingers, and he saw the soft breast against which the black lace sprayed so delicately rise upon a sudden stormy breath.

Instantly a sort of heady excitement touched him, and his own hand seemed to be thrilling as if with electricity, and all the air faintly ringing as it might ring after the silencing of bells. He felt his heart throb, and looking at Margaret, saw that her gaze was steadfastly fixed upon the fire, and that her blue eyes were starry with a sort of troubled light, a perilous pleasure and fear.

Indeed, she knew, and he knew that she knew, that there was utter madness in lingering here, in this seductive hour of firelight and warmth, and solitude, and pleasant weariness. And in her fast-hammering heart she was blaming herself furiously, and yet always conscious of a sort of desperate delight in every prolonged second that knitted their lives together.

"Margaret," Stanley said, out of a silence, "is there anything in the world so wonderful as friendship?"

"I was thinking that!"

"My dear," the man said, with a great sigh, "if we had met each other years ago—I've no right to say this, I'm not even letting myself think of it! But if we *had*."

"I know!" Margaret sent him a glimpse of her eyes, half-fearful, half-smiling, before she turned them thoughtfully to the fire again.

"Life isn't ever as simple as that," Stanley said.

"No, I suppose not!"

"But do you ever think of it—of you and me, here, with just ourselves and our lives to plan for——"

He stopped, and after a pause she answered him seriously: "If I could *stop* thinking of it!"

There was a silence, then Stan said resolutely:

"You don't think Shirley need know of this?"

"Shirley!" Margaret said, rousing suddenly from a dream. "But why should she? I—you—I—but what is there to tell her?" she stammered.

"Nothing!" Stanley said, flushing.

"I suppose life is full of men and women who meet each other too late," Margaret said, after a pause. "It doesn't seem to be our fault, does it? And I think we can make it good—turn it to good. I know I shall always be happy, and not hurt, by it, and I'll always like to remember today, and that we are friends!"

And immediately, and without warning, she got to her feet, and with every intention of merely passing him, she laid her finger-tips lightly upon his shoulder, and said, "Good-night."

"Good-night!" Stanley echoed. He caught at her hand, and it was trembling; he saw that her face was pale under its dusky pallor, and that there was a look of entreaty in her eyes. Instantly, without loosing her hand, he got to his own feet and put his arm about her.

Margaret did not speak; he knew that she was trying to evade his kisses. Both were suddenly trembling, and on the instant it seemed impossible to them both to separate in this fashion. A terrible and delicious weakness ran through Margaret and made her breath quicken and her senses swim.

There were no words. The sirocco had come upon them both with overpowering violence; there was nothing to say. After a long moment, still without speaking, Margaret freed herself and went to the door of her room, and opening it without a backward glance, went in and shut the door.

Stanley remained standing, looking at the plain old white-painted panels behind which she had disappeared. He stood

there for a long time, his head slightly lowered, a half-smile upon his bronzed, boyish face, and his grey eyes half-closed, and fixed intently.

She was not twenty feet away, and the door was unlocked. And he had aroused all the splendor, all the passion, of that gipsy heart at last.

But the moments went by; the fire broke, the rain fell outside, and the clock ticked steadily in the warm, dim room. Margaret did not return.

Stanley merely wanted another glimpse of her; one more good-night, one more word, whatever its character. He walked quickly and noiselessly to her door and laid his fingers upon the knob.

Had she heard him? It seemed to him there was a deathly stillness within. Was she standing, just inside, with her frightened eyes upon that same door? There was a long silence.

His heart thundered, hearing her quick step within. And he knew that she had been standing motionless just inside, for his quick ears caught the little clinking jerk of her mirror light, as she lighted it by its dangling chain.

"Margaret!" he said, tapping.

Silence. But he could hear her moving.

Suddenly Stanley, frowning and with his face scarlet, returned to the fire and flung himself into his chair. He had heard within her room the opening of the inner door, that connected with Nora's room, and a sleepy conference with the old nurse over the child.

He sat still until there was utter silence again. Margaret and Nora had exchanged several comments, and he had heard the running and splashing of water. That was all; she was probably reading in bed, or already asleep. At every click or creak of the old house Stanley looked hopefully at her door. Perhaps she was going to put her dark head out of the door and say good-night again.

But she did not. And Stanley, after another cigarette, put

out the lights quietly, and screened the fire, and went noiselessly to his own room.

For a long time he lay awake, thinking, remembering her words and her expressions. And for a longer time, only a few doors away, Margaret lay awake, too, her dark head pillowed upon her up-flung arm, her eyes staring into the blackness above her, and her ears soothed by the symphony of wind and water that went on and on in the darkness of the mountains outside.

"I can't see that this cheats Shirley," was Stanley's decision, when the clocks were striking one. "We'll never take anything away that belongs to her; this is in an entirely different world!"

And Margaret, wearied by the long day and by the unceasing march of her thoughts, came, at about the same time, to the same conclusion.

"There's no reason why this should hurt Shirley," she thought. "We can make it something beautiful and helpful to us both, without encroaching upon *her* rights! A man and a woman can have a safe friendship, after all, I hope! And it will be my business to see that this friendship *is* safe, that neither one of us ever has even a word to regret!"

Still, when she met him before breakfast the next day, it was strangely hard to meet his eyes with all the frank pleasure that such a friendship should insure. Margaret, brushing masses of matted wet leaves from the porch, her black gown half covered by her heavy silk Japanese jacket, raised her blue eyes with a conscious effort, tried to speak, tried to smile, and failed in both.

Stanley, handsome, fresh, pleasantly odorous of toilet waters and soaps, and wearing his becoming old tweeds, bent over her brown hand. They were both a little flushed and incoherent as they greeted each other.

The morning had broken gloriously, in a flood of brilliant sunshine. A high bright wind was blowing, the air was like

honey, and all about the farm there was a ringing and splashing and flying of all small movable matters; gates slammed, and sheets of water sprayed from the windmill, a cracked branch somewhere whined and whined, and from the woods came the sharp barking of the dogs, who had treed a squirrel or a bob-cat.

Margaret and Stanley and Jim walked about the place, and to all three of them there was heaven in the winter morning that bore so sweet a resemblance to the spring. Margaret picked great double white violets, and pale blue violets on their frail, long, jointed stems, and ever afterward the scent of them carried her back to this delicious hour, when all the world seemed made for herself and Stanley.

The farm was dotted with great pools of water, ruffled by the breezes, and giving back the cloud-dotted blueness of the sky. Jim, in boots, shouted and splashed; to the others life held that thrilling sweetness when every word and look is fraught with significance—it was enough to be alive. The thought that at last they understood each other—that they were friends, lent Margaret a new and exquisite beauty, and Stanley's whole nature seemed to have undergone a change that was softening and deepening; there were new expressions in his handsome, sunburned face, and new inflections in his pleasant voice. The grin was less boyish, it had gained something of sweetness and soberness, and his big hand was very gentle when he helped Margaret over a bit of ground oozing and soggy from the rains, or shouldered Jim when the cattle, streaming by, choked the lane, and, wild after four days of confinement, made for the new grass of the sunshiny slopes.

The Quitito, it was ascertained, had adapted itself, as only water can, to its new course. It was cleared now, and already the trampled banks had been smoothed and shaped by the rains, and the old pools and channels were drying in the healing wind and sunshine. Margaret and Stanley eyed their work with the deep satisfaction of pioneers.

Presently they went back to a hearty breakfast, and then Margaret disappeared to superintend household affairs, and Stanley went down to the farrowing-sheds with Battersby.

That was the end of the happy time. For just before luncheon, when the winter sun was really warm, and the runnels of brown water that had framed the roads had almost disappeared, when Jim had been allowed to take off his top sweater, and the wind had died away, Shirley and the Willis Hyde-Browns arrived.

Instantly pandemonium awakened. Shirley looked stunning in the big brown furs she wore upon her arrival, and almost more attractive in the white woolly sweater, white skirt, thick white stockings and white boots she immediately put on. She was in glorious spirits, witty, vivacious, uncritical and enthusiastic.

Everything was satisfactory to Shirley today. She displayed the ranch to young Mrs. Hyde-Brown, a bride and a stranger, with all the pleasure of the chatelaine.

"Stan and I will be here a good deal of the time—at least, I believe those are my orders!" Shirley said, with a humorous look. "He's mad about the place, and I must say I think I'm going to be as cracked as he is! Isn't it a nice old dive? We've had an old Chinese cook here for twenty-two years, you know —wait until you taste the biscuits and the pies! Miss Yorke, do ask Hang for pies tomorrow."

She introduced Margaret prettily.

"This is Miss Yorke, Constance. You know Miss Yorke, Billy," she said. "Did Mr. Crittenden get drowned, coming down?" she asked.

"No, he got down in the clear weather," Margaret answered, feeling her manner wooden, and her heart lead. "But the storm came back, around the mountain, at about four and kept him."

"Fancy!" Shirley said, unsuspiciously and indifferently. This was before Stanley had returned from the lower farm

and before he knew of her arrival. The women went indoors to the clean white rooms, where Margaret and Nora had put new soap and fresh towels only that morning, and where fires were burning in airtight stoves. And Shirley, briskly changing her clothing, chattered away happily, holding Margaret by an occasional question.

Mrs. Hyde-Brown was an Englishwoman, with an Englishwoman's delightful sureness of herself and her class. Margaret had not been in her presence five minutes before she felt herself pleasantly relegated to the rank of the nursery governess.

"So tnis is the little boy?" said Constance. "Isn't he a ducky little chap? Wasn't it quite too horrid, his losing his mother and that?" she said to Shirley.

"Well, it was and it wasn't," Shirley answered, strapping her handsome shoes. "It meant a perfect pot of money for Stan, of course!"

"I suppose so. I wonder if you'd be so very kind as to get me a glarce of water, Miss Yorke?" Constance said.

"Certainly!" But Margaret's face flushed, and when she had returned with the water, she immediately went away again, taking the child with her. Constance and Shirley were talking of the wedding now; Constance begged that it might be before Christmas, when she and Billy were going to New York, and Shirley assured her that it would surely be long before that.

Margaret's heart turned to stone. From this moment everything went at cross-purposes, and every successive hour deepened her irritation, resentment, and pain.

Stanley found an enthusiastic admirer of his acres, his cattle, his establishment generally, in Constance Hyde-Brown. The bride had all the healthy interest of her race in what was practical, wholesome, and simple. She said intelligent things of the Herefords, the new Percherons, the litters of tiny pigs. She asked Stanley casual impressive questions as

to the English dairy-farms he had seen; had he ever seen Lord Exmoor's herd? Tommy Exmoor was quite too absurd about them. Had he ever seen Flodden Farms?

Shirley took her cue from her friend. She was interested and intelligent, too. Oh, Stan had built the new pews, hadn't he? She pouted when they all laughed at the term; stanchions, then, she amended, prettily flushed. Oh, and Constance must admire the creamery, because that was Stan's pet extravagance.

Willis Hyde-Brown, with the age-old pleasure of the male in his young wife's success, also absorbed Stan, with an undertone conversation regarding some college friend. Margaret, who had left the house with them at Stan's special request, found herself ignored and superfluous, walking with Willis and Shirley, and seized the first possible opportunity for slipping away and returning to the house.

At luncheon, despite her most earnest effort, she could not seem to throw off the stupid mood of depression, irritation, and heaviness that bound her like an evil spell. The very muscles of her face hurt her when she tried to smile naturally; she bent over the child, attentive to his small wants.

Stanley, man-fashion, saw nothing. Shirley had suddenly returned to her nicest mood, the only mood in which he and she had anything in common: she was speaking his language; she was interested, good-natured, amusing. The weather had cleared, and this rather stocky, clear-voiced wife of Billy Hyde-Brown's was a delightful woman.

Contentedly, they settled down to bridge, after lunch, on the porch. The afternoon flew; it was four o'clock, and the sunshine was suddenly gone, and they had moved in beside the fire, before Stanley, thrilling over the last hand, thought to wonder what had become of Margaret.

"I wonder whether Miss Yorke wouldn't like to play a rubber? We could cut in," he said.

Constance raised surprised but good-natured eyebrows.

"Does she play? How very odd!" she smiled. "I thought she was the little boy's governess?"

"She was a sort of companion, daughter, everything, to my aunt," Stanley explained in an undertone, with a glance toward the door of her room.

"I don't think I would, Stan," Shirley said mildly, with a faint negative motion of her head. "It means that we have to pivot, it upsets the gambling, and everything. We've just taken three hundred points from Billy, who doesn't seem to grasp the game at all," she added, with a triumphant smile for Willis, "and he's laying for us!"

The hands had meanwhile been dexterously dealt by Constance, who disliked losing large sums at bridge, and was thirsting for revenge. Stanley succumbed to the subtle temptation of the thirteen concealed cards and sank into his chair.

"Why can't you two be married in my house—my big room would be ideal for it?" Constance Hyde-Brown asked presently. "Do think of it! It'll have to be a small wedding, I suppose, and we could handle it so beautifully."

"That sounds nice to me," Shirley said, serenely.

"When's it to be?" Willis asked, picking up his cards.

"Any time now," Shirley supplied, quietly.

"You're quite delicious, you know," Constance said amusedly, looking from one to the other. "Haven't you made up your minds yet?"

"We've had such a deuce of a time," Stanley explained, "everything's been so mixed up."

"Well, will it be in a week or two, or in a month or two?" Constance pursued, with British calm.

"Oh, in a week or two!" Shirley said, comfortably. "Won't it, Stan?" she asked, innocently.

"Well, I suppose so!" Stanley did not know what else to answer. He could hardly deny it, here before these interested friends of hers. Yet even here, in the absorption of a card game, he tried to picture Shirley as his wife, and reached a

blank wall; there was nothing there to imagine. And when his thoughts, on the other hand, strayed to the memory of that other woman, to the dream of Margaret, nervous, definite, mysterious, he felt a constantly recurrent thrill. Those brown, vital hands, that thin, quickly-moving body, the rich soft masses of her dark hair, and the childish earnestness and appeal in her black-fringed blue eyes, were always in his mental vision.

She had pleaded fatigue and had gone to bed after dinner. Now her voice suddenly struck across his half-vague thoughts of her, and he looked up from the card-table to see that she had come in from the direction of the kitchen and had letters in her hands.

Battersby had gotten the late mail, she explained, and there was a telegram for Mrs. Theobald.

Stanley tossed over the letters indifferently: just receipted bills, for the most part. Shirley, with the conventional apology, tore open her telegram.

"Oh, my God!" she said, after reading it with one glance. And giving the company a comprehensive look that showed her face not totally devoid of a certain complacent willingness to accept this surprise and shock, she said: "It's from Mildred Bramhall, my best friend in New York. It's about Cuyler, Stan. Listen!"

And she read the telegram aloud:

"'Cuyler Theobald given few weeks to live; apoplexy. Asking for you; would advise your coming at once. Seems anxious to be friends again. Mildred.'"

Stanley, in the second of dead silence that followed, looked merely angry and disturbed; a dark expression of distaste and contempt changed his pleasant face. The others were shocked and concerned, and Shirley wore, in addition, an air instantly dramatic and self-conscious. It was gratifying to take the centre of the stage, under any conditions.

Naturally all eyes were upon her; Stanley never knew whether it was a sound or a movement that drew his attention suddenly from Shirley to Margaret.

Margaret had been standing at the centre-table, after the delivery of the letters and telegram. Now the man's glance went to her with concern, and almost as quickly as his look his arms reached her, and he caught her strongly. Her face was ashen, under its rich, even color, and she looked ill.

"Margaret!" he said sharply, "what is it!" And he called loudly, "Nora!"

Constance Hyde-Brown, on Margaret's other side, half supported her. Margaret made an effort, painful even to see, to recover her self-control, the color ebbed from her lips, and she collapsed, shutting her eyes.

"Sorry——" she whispered, with a ghastly attempt at a smile.

"For heaven's sake——!" Shirley said, half-impatiently at being jarred so rudely from her rôle of leading lady. Stanley, now carrying Margaret bodily, with Constance, all concern, and the horrified Nora following him, brushed her briefly aside.

"Open that door please, Willis," he said to young Hyde-Brown. "Just a minute, Shirley, please. She's fainted. . . ."

CHAPTER XVII

MORNING came to "Uplands" with a high, smothering fog; the encircling mountains were lost to view, and the canyons undulated with the milky folds of the soft and cloudy billows of the mist. The garden was motionless, wrapped in silence and obscurity; the big trees dripped softly, the winding road, two hundred feet from the house, was invisible behind a wall of white veils, and the sloping lines of the old roof were softened and dimmed under the heavy blanket.

Stanley, taking an early walk about the farm, after a long and restless night, noted, as he had noted a thousand times, and with eternal satisfaction, that the comfortable domestic life of barns and sheds proceeded placidly, unchecked by the apparent stoppage of all Nature's forces. Chickens were clucking over the steaming manure pile outside the stables, the cows filed lazily down into the enveloping mists; were vague red masses, were colorless shadows upon shadows, and were gone. Stanley heard Battersby's voice, Tony's shout, and the brisk banging of hammers; new chicken-runs were being built; the men reached their work at seven and rattled away in their Fords at four o'clock.

Against his skin, which felt warm and dry, the fresh damp airs moved restoringly; he breathed deep breaths, drinking in the refreshing peace and prosperity all about. The Portuguese milkers were carrying pails of warm milk, topped with gray foam, toward the sheds; Stanley followed them, and watched the fluid, so oddly different in its pinkish-whiteness from milk that has been standing even an hour, strain into the wide pans.

He loved his home—he loved his home, the man thought, with a pang of keen affection. He loved these activities, these interests, these smells and sights and sounds. After the feverish discomfort of the night, the waking and dozing, always with a sense of impending misfortune upon him, he had risen disconsolately; no use to try to sleep, there was no more sleep in the world.

But now this early rising, and those lost hours, seemed nothing. He was here, well and strong, and even healthily hungry, and in this new day anything might happen.

Something did happen, almost immediately, for Margaret and Jim came abruptly about the corner of the big hay-barn, and Jim, rosy and noisy in his white sweater and nicely rubber-shod little feet, came dancing and shrieking toward him. The child's animated little face, with the delightful little tip to the round nose, and the aureole of bright hair, was so innocently, so unconsciously gay that a fresh wave of confidence and cheerfulness entered Stan's heart as he returned the filial yet indifferent kiss.

Margaret followed the child more slowly, but without hesitation. She was muffled in a big woolly coat, of creamy camel's hair. It was belted about her slender waist; her slim ankles, in brown woolly stockings, disappeared into sturdy brown pumps. The fog had curled her rich dark hair into a cloud about the softly-olive forehead, her face was pale and looked strained and weary; there was a spiritualized quality about her whole appearance that instantly appealed to Stan, and her dark blue eyes managed a smile as they met his.

"I slept horribly," she said, in answer to the concern in his eyes. "And you did, too!" she added quickly.

"Hardly at all," he answered, smiling down at her. "But I always love to get up early," he continued philosophically, "and I feel fine. But how about you? You fainted, last night."

"Yes, I know," she said, flushing hotly, but meeting his eyes squarely. "I suppose I was more tired than I knew! It

used to be a bad habit of mine, but I've not fainted for years. But Nora took splendid care of me, and I'm only ashamed of having acted so foolishly!"

"But you did have a bad night," Stanley commented solicitously, as they walked slowly along together, after the child. The stalks of dry yarrow and milkweed were delicately frosted with fog, under the bare orchard trees, and the orange spheres of the pumpkins, lying in a tangle of shrivelled vines, were etched with the same tiny globules of water. Chrysanthemums, beaten down and mud-spattered by the storm, sent forth their sharp pungent aroma into the dreaming morning.

"The sun is behind that fog," Margaret prophesied, ignoring his question, "and we shall have a wonderful day!"

"Margar, can't I take off my sweater?" Jim pleaded.

"Indeed you may not!" she assured him mildly. Jim ran after the Airedales again; Stan, suddenly realizing what she was to the child, felt a moment of emotion as strong as pain. They slowly approached the turn of the road by the old windmill, from where they could look down at the milky wall that covered the canyon.

But the layers of the mist were noiselessly shifting and moving now, and far up, above the mountain range, its upper edges were melting into the pale blue-white of the sky. The sun, struggling obscurely and unseen, was slowly fighting back the fog, great masses of it drifted slowly oceanward, and tiny remnants, tangled in the hollows and valleys, curled up, moved uneasily, flattened themselves into transparent scarves and were gone.

Presently great shafts of pale winter sunlight shot through the enveloping veils, and over the entire farm, and its stretches of woodland and meadow, and over the massive, blue-black flanks of the great mountains; the glorious fight went on, in the open now, with the beaten banners of the mist curling and rising, and roofs and fences steaming and twinkling in the bath of gracious light.

Margaret and Stanley had stood silent, watching it, the girl's dropped fingers held lightly in his. Now they turned to face each other, and all the glory of the dawning was reflected in their tired yet infinitely peaceful faces.

"You frightened me, when you fainted," Stanley said, with a sort of timidity, when they were walking toward the house, in the rapidly strengthening sunshine. Their relationship seemed to him to have appreciably altered since the arrival of Shirley's telegram last night. He knew that there was much that they must say to each other, yet there seemed no longer to be any reason for hurry about it; she was Margaret, he was Stanley, their lives were in their own hands, and they could trust each other. "The—the look in your eyes," he said, "and then that sudden collapse! It made me realize just what you are to me."

"Stupid, stupid thing to do!" she said, anxiously and hurriedly. "It all came over me, suddenly——"

"What did?" Stanley asked, in a low tone, as she paused.

Margaret did not answer. They were on the porch now, and the uncertain sunshine was falling upon them, through the stripped fingers of the grape-vine. Margaret's own firm, nervous brown fingers tore a shrivelled leaf from the vine, and she crumpled it into bits and strewed it upon the garden-bed below.

"It came over me, too, Margaret," Stanley said, watching her closely. "I felt for the first time that we love each other, that you and I are to be man and wife!"

Again she did not answer. But she raised her eyes, brimming with slow tears, and smiled at him uncertainly.

"That was it, wasn't it, Margaret?" he asked. "You knew then that it was—love, between you and me, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said, in a low tone, "I knew then that it was—that."

"And you knew there never could be anyone else in my life, dear," Stanley said. "I'll wait, and I'll give you all the

time you want. But it's you and me, now, Margaret, against all the world!"

"You and me," she whispered, her lips trembling. She slipped into his own hand her fine, vital fingers; her slender figure veered toward him for a second. "What about—her?" she asked, with a glance in the direction of Shirley's room.

"I'll manage her!"

"You know, of course, that I am not free, Stan!"

"You told me that." Stanley smiled at her encouragingly. "But you *could* be free, Margaret?"

"Only by breaking my oath!" she reminded him quickly.

"You mean," he said, in a low tone, "you mean as every woman does, who gets a divorce?"

"No," she corrected him, with a wistful smile. "The divorce—or the separation—may be necessary. But the remarriage is the thing."

"You're not divorced, Margaret?"

"No."

"And you feel that you couldn't manage it without letting him—your husband, know of Jim's birth?"

"It isn't only that, Stan. It's three separate oaths," Margaret told him, in a troubled tone. "There's my wedding-oath, fool, fool, fool that I was! And then there's an oath I took myself and gave—another person—before I gave Jim away, that never, never, *never* would I betray that man who told Mrs. Cutting that Jim's father and mother were dead!"

"That was her lawyer, old Trowbridge," Stan said.

"That was old Trowbridge," she agreed, with a startled look. "And then there's a third oath, Stan," she added, after a pause. "My father was very religious, you know; his faith was all the world to my dad. Darling Dad!" Margaret interrupted herself to say tenderly. "He distrusted my mother's profession, and he had such fears for me! And when he was dying he made me swear to keep the faith——"

"No man has a right to ask his daughter for such a promise!" Stanley said warmly, as her voice stopped.

"Ah, but he didn't—not as you think!" she assured him eagerly. "But this is what he said, Stan. He was lying, heavy and quiet, with pneumonia, and he knew he was desperately ill. I was only eleven—I remember it as if it were yesterday! We had two horrid, alcoved rooms, in a Columbus hotel—a second-rate hotel. And Mother was dressing for the theatre, making up her face, and everything, with tears running down her cheeks. She adored him, you know, although she never understood him! And I was supposed to be helping the trained nurse take care of him and feeling so important and useful!"

"I can see you!" Stanley said, picturing the eager, gipsy child, the man heavy with stupor, and the pretty actress mother dividing her interest between her own beauty and the tragedy in the dull alcove.

"After Mother went, he called me to the bed," Margaret went on, in a tone of solemn recollection, "and I knelt down. And he said to me, 'Baby, if ever you give up your faith, promise me that it will be for neither of two reasons. Not because of laziness, and not because you want to break the laws. There never was a law yet,' he said, 'that wasn't hard to keep!' And I promised, six hours before he died," Margaret finished, turning upon Stanley her beautiful dark blue eyes, with their long black lashes touched with sudden tears.

Stanley had nothing to say. A moment later, in silence, he followed her into the sunshiny dining-room, where the tremulous winter sunlight, streaming through white, ruffled curtains, was augmented by the light and warmth of a crackling wood fire. The breakfast-table was a pleasant confusion of sparkle and glitter; the silver shone, and shafts of light were struck from flower bowls and water-glasses. No one was there but Nora, hovering over Jim, who was busy

with oatmeal, and Hang was audibly chattering to his underling and nephew, Chung, in regard to rolls and omelette.

"Just the same, I can't help being happy, Margaret," Stan said, shaking out his napkin, when Nora had gone. "I can't help feeling that everything is going to come out all right!"

"The main thing," she said, with an adorable upward flash of blue eyes, "the *main* thing is all right!"

"You mean, our liking each other?" He leaned close to her as he spoke, and the look in his bronzed, boyish face, with its big, white teeth, made her heart flutter suddenly.

"I thought that would never come to me again," Margaret said.

"And you are sure, now?" he asked, in the same tone.

"Sure?" she echoed, faintly interrogatory. And with her odd smile she added, "Ah, my dear!"

The little endearment made his head spin and his voice thicken.

"We *will* be happy here, Margaret," he pleaded. "You and I, and our boy, and our farm!"

"If one dared to think of it, even!" the girl said. "Shirley will feel—may feel all the more reason for hurrying the wedding, now," she added.

"I don't see why. It might work just the other way," Stan said, reflectively. "But either way, it doesn't matter, for I shall have to tell her the truth."

"You're going to do that?" Margaret asked.

"I have to, now."

"Stanley!" she said.

"I can't quite see now how I ever put it off this long. However, I'll have to tell her. And then we'll simply have to find some way round your problem—there must be some way out."

"Couldn't Shirley make it very hard for you, Stan?"

"Oh, she will!" he said serenely.

"She might sue you, you know."

"Not with Theobald dying. She talked to me last night about securing her share of his money. She said, in so many words, that she wouldn't be married until that was settled."

"But a divorced woman isn't a man's widow?"

"She might easily be, in one of those eastern states. Shirley got her divorce here."

"But, Stan, if her husband dies, does her alimony stop?"

"I don't know. I never thought of that. I suppose it does, unless he leaves it to her in his will, which," said Stanley, positively, "I know he won't do. In the first place, he bitterly resented her leaving him; she told me that. I guess he's a good deal of a beast, but he was trying to prevent her divorcing him for at least a year before she beat it to Los Angeles. And she showed me one letter he wrote her, about two months ago—he seemed to hate her!"

"Then, Stan, with only her own money—a few hundreds, she told me—and no alimony, and possibly losing the prospect of marrying you, isn't there a chance that she may fight?" Margaret asked.

"What—to marry me?"

"Well, it has been done."

"Yes, but Shirley wouldn't do that!" Stanley said, laughing uncomfortably. "I—Lord, I've known her all my life, there's no harm in her," he added. "And I don't think she'd do that. Damages, you mean? I don't know, but people in our class don't seem to do that sort of thing! Or do they?" he asked, pursuing the thought with a sort of whimsical uneasiness.

"Well, until I am free," Margaret reminded him, "things can drift along."

"Never," said Stanley, in an undertone, as a stir in the living-room beyond them announced Shirley or the Hyde-Browns, "never did anyone in this world love a woman as I love every inch of you!"

Margaret felt the solid earth stagger beneath her, and the

radiant color rushed to her face. But she and Stanley had rallied sufficiently to greet the Hyde-Browns decorously enough, as the bride and groom came out for breakfast.

They discussed the fog, which was now returning stealthily over the tops of the mountains from the west; the sun had gone under a cloud; light and gaiety seemed to have died away from the breakfast-room.

"We are disgracefully late!" said Constance, looking red-cheeked and cheerful after a cold tub. "But this husband of mine has things all his own way, and he hates to get up in the mornings!"

And she sent him a young wife's look of loving reproof.

"Shirley saves us, by being later," young Hyde-Brown yawned, as Shirley, all lavender and pink ribbons, and filmy layers of lace, rouged, powdered, perfumed to a nicety, and smiling sleepily, joined them at the table.

Stanley had risen to draw her chair out for her, and she kissed him quite simply, immediately seating herself, shaking back her ruffles, planting her white elbows upon the table, and looking about her in her sunniest mood.

"I am a prospective widow, you know, I have some excuse!" she reminded them, with a whimsical smile. "My dear," she added, to the company in general, "isn't it pitiful? I've been thinking about it all night. Poor Cuyler—he isn't forty yet, you know, and he has the constitution of a lion! If it was anybody else but Mildred Bramhall, I simply shouldn't believe it. But she's my best friend in New York and such a darling. She's been in love with Peter Kilmoran since before her first marriage. I think he's the stunningest man on the American stage—truly I do. He's mad about her, but his wife has all the money, and—as he told me at lunch at the Biltmore, one day, he represented the interest on a million dollars! He's paying his first wife a terrible alimony, too; he told Mildred it was more than he made, some years. And he and Cuyler and she and I were inseparable, all dur-

ing that last year. But think of Cuyler dying—no, no eggs, Hang, poor missy got no appetite this morning, no eat nothing. I really can't eat—it's had the strangest effect on me," said Shirley frankly to the company. "I'm that way—I'm too soft. Everyone knows how Cuyler treated me, and how hard I tried to stand by him, and yet now—I feel all broken up, honestly I do!"

And Shirley smiled with watering eyes and looked down at her locked white hands, glittering with rings.

"You idiot, you ought to hate him!" said Constance Hyde-Brown, healthily busy with honey and biscuits and good-naturedly contemptuous.

"Oh, I know it!" Shirley agreed quickly. "But I'm no good at hating! I'd go to him, yes, I would, if I thought it would do him the least good," she added, with a little emotion. "Yes, I would!" she repeated quickly, as Stanley's lean, reddened face broke into an incredulous grin.

"You and Stan get married and take in New York on your honeymoon," Willis Hyde-Brown suggested, with the levity of his generation. Stanley did not smile, his face had grown grave, and he said briefly:

"Pretty good place for you to keep away from, Shirley!"

"My dear," Shirley said placatingly, now trifling with bites of omelette filched one by one from the platter, "Cuyler doesn't need *me*. I was merely saying that if he *were* alone, or in trouble, I'm just fool enough to rush to him. No brains," said Shirley of herself, pathetically. "Give me that hot plate, will you, Miss Yorke?" she added, falling upon her breakfast at last in real earnest. "Horrible, horrible fog!" she said, looking out of the darkened windows, at a world all bleak and white again. "Well, we can play bridge and drop the subject of poor Cuyler and his apoplexy!"

They did play bridge, from ten o'clock until a late luncheon hour, but Cuyler's name persistently crept into the conversation, and it was obvious that Shirley was softening toward

him, was growing pensive and introspective, as the hours went by.

She called Stanley from her room, in the late afternoon, and he went to her doorway.

"Tanny, is there talk of tea?" asked Shirley, who was on a broad couch beside the window, with a fat soft rose-silk comforter over her.

"Will you have some tea?" he asked, alertly.

"Would it be a horrid bother?"

"My Lord, no! And some cake?"

"No, no cake," said Shirley judiciously. "But ask him if he could make me a little toast, with caviar, Stan? Or pâté, I don't care. What are you doing, big boy?" she asked, sleepily, as he came over toward her.

"Why, we were just going to take a little turn round the place. There's no let-up to the fog, it's like a rain, and Mrs. Hyde-Brown said she felt all muggy."

"Let them go without you, dearest, and come back and have a little tea-party just with me!" Shirley coaxed prettily.

Stanley did not hesitate, although she could hardly have proposed anything less inviting. He had been dozing, with the rest, after the early afternoon rubbers, and now he longed for the fresh cool outdoor air and the hour of exercise. They had half planned, he and Margaret and Constance Hyde-Brown, a scramble up to the higher forest-gate, where the Jesuit lilies grew in spring, and where the vague wheel-road wandered away beyond the fence into a delicious jungle of oaks, madrones, young redwoods and wild lilac trees. Stan and Jim had seen a bobcat here once, and the Airedales had chased what looked strangely like a red fox. There were deer on the hill, too, and this, of all the year, was the afternoon upon which to see them, when the fog invaded their sacred aisles and blanketed all the frightening outer world from their clear eyes.

Besides, Margaret had on the woolly coat again, and al-

though he had had no chance for a single word alone with her since morning, the memory of that morning talk had been sweet on his senses all day, and the soft fogs outside, and the drowsing fires within, had fed his mood of dreaming and content. She had not spoken to him, this afternoon, but in her starry eyes there was recollection too, a delicious confusion of promise and fear and joy and faith. He had even recognized in himself the disloyal hope that Shirley would not join them.

CHAPTER XVIII

BUT now Shirley had summoned him, and he had meekly agreed to the caviar sandwiches and the tea, in her warm, quiet room, where the cold afternoon light was entering so baldly. He sent the others on without him, and himself carried the tray to Shirley's side, and seated himself beside her, in a wicker chair, and accepted his plate and cup with a great air of friendliness and pleasure.

Shirley, her lips red, her cheeks childishly flushed, her face delicately powdered, looked her prettiest. She was curled in her cushions and her rose-colored cover; she loved to preside at the five-o'clock ceremony and often said that tea was her favorite meal. But to Stanley it only wasted the nicest hour of the day and spoiled his appetite for dinner.

"To get up and put your boots on and come out for a walk would do you a lot more good than this mess!" he could not resist saying.

"Oh, darling, let's not develop our characters!" Shirley pleaded, dimpling at him naughtily. "Who went?"

"Jim and the Hyde-Browns and Margaret," Stanley answered, wondering if anything that the last word meant to him had rushed through his quiet utterance of it.

"And you wish you were with them, of course?"

"No—no. But I do get so darned stupid, in the house all day!"

"Well, you're going to stay with me, now!" Shirley said, with pretty despotism, putting out her hand, to hold his. "Stan," she added, suddenly serious, biting into a damp little flat pâté sandwich, "I've been thinking, all day. You don't

know what this means to me! Stan, do you think I ought to go on to New York?"

"Go on to New York?" he echoed, astonished. "Why should you?"

"To see poor Cuyler," said Shirley solemnly, watching his face intently.

"To—— Good God, what an idea!"

"No, but listen, Stan. If he loves me and if he wants me?" Shirley asked, almost in tears. "It's just got on my nerves," she said pathetically. "That poor boy, alone with a lot of nurses and doctors—no one that belongs to him, or cares if he lives or dies! And he always adored me, in his way, Stan—somehow, I feel as if I were turning my back upon a pal in trouble!"

"My dear girl, you're just working yourself up about this," Stanley said, in disapproval.

"Yes, but that's not all, Stan," Shirley said, discouraged, but not diverted. "There's—there's all that money!"

"I don't see what that has to do with you," Stanley said, almost sternly.

"You mean as your wife? Yes, of course. But do let's be reasonable, dear," begged Shirley, trying to win him with her smile, her pleading eyes, and the touch of her hand. "I know how you feel, Stan," she said. "But just listen to me!"

Stanley, his face dark, sat back in his chair and folded his big arms. Shirley conceded him a fond and reproachful laugh, before she said, softly, lightly, and placatingly:

"Stan dear, I know. But there are *millions* there, my dear, or a million, anyway. There's all the Madison Richards' money, now. And why should it go to those Madison cousins of his? If I go on, and just *see* the poor boy, and explain to him exactly *why* I had to divorce him, there's no reason why it shouldn't mean a comfortable slice of it for me. Now *is* there? You know, having her own money is a mighty nice thing, for a woman, Stan. Six or seven hundred thousand, say,

would be *nothing* to him, and it *would* make a difference—now, wouldn't it?—to me. It would mean that we were really rich, and you have to have so much nowadays! Please, please, don't talk nonsense about wanting to do it all," begged Shirley, smiling, nervous and breathless, and raising herself from her cushions, on her elbow, "because if it was only for my jewelry—for my *clothes*—isn't it well worth just a flying trip to New York and a few weeks trying to make that poor boy die contented? For I'm going to miss my alimony terribly, Stan—I won't lie about it, I hate lies. I've had two thousand a month, and the minute I marry I haven't a cent—it isn't going to be easy for me, my dear, or for you, either! And this is so simple, and I know Cuyler so well, and ten to one there's some other woman there—he might even marry her the last minute! So, truly, I do think the wisest thing would be for me to go. I believe I ought to wire tonight and have Milly Bramhall go see him——" She paused, all reasonableness and appeal. "What do you really *advise*, Stan?" she asked.

Stanley had opened his mouth once or twice during her speech as if he might have interrupted her. But now he looked indifferent and apathetic; the utter coldness of his grey eyes was veiled by half-fallen lids; his strong mouth barely moved as he said quietly:

"Why, if you feel that way, I suppose you had better go!"

"No, be nice to me!" Shirley protested playfully. "What do you really think?"

Stanley, whose lean, somewhat hard face was red, continued to sit back in his chair, with folded arms.

"I should suppose that of all persons in the world——" he began, coldly.

"That I'm the last one to be there?" Shirley finished eagerly. "But, Stan dear, you're wrong. I never felt that way about Cuyler. He was always terribly fond of me, and I certainly tried my best to stick to him. If it was some *other* man—

some man I'd never been married to, say," Shirley explained, "then it *would* be out of the question! But after all, I'm Mrs. Cuyler Theobald, and Milly says—you read it!—'anxious to be friends again.' Stan, you're a business man, you *must* see that it'd be absolute madness for me not to go. I don't know how much money his uncle left him, but it was just *scads*, and when you consider how terribly hard it is to *get* money in this world, and how frightfully expensive everything is now —honestly, it seems to me it would be perfectly silly——"

She stopped, and there was silence in the dimming room, whose simple furniture was retreating into the rapidly deepening dusk. A chill was creeping in with the mountain night, and Stanley rose and clanked about Shirley's airtight stove; pushing in paper and kindling and sturdy short madrone logs. The flame leaped and roared, and instant heat began to pulse in waves into the cool twilight.

"You mean, delay our wedding so that you can go to Cuyler?" Stanley asked drily, returning to his seat.

"Well, for a few weeks. People could think that I was going on for some clothes," Shirley explained brightly, "and I wouldn't wear mourning, Stan, I positively wouldn't do that! Unless at the funeral," she added thoughtfully.

"By golly, you are a wonder!" Stanley commented, with a short, barking laugh.

"Well, I think you're extremely silly about it," Shirley pouted. "Why, Mabel Reynolds had both her husbands up at the Westchester place, at a house party, once, and Bert Lilly named her second little boy for her first husband—really she did. She said that Joe Tait was mad about children, and he was awfully fond of her and Tom Lilly—— Besides, Stan," she interrupted herself, struck by a new argument, "if it was a business deal of *yours*, and if by putting off our wedding *you* could make a couple of hundred thousand in a few weeks, do you suppose I'd say anything? You *know* I wouldn't! I don't see why just being divorced

makes it necessary for you to hate people," finished Shirley plaintively.

"And then your idea would be to come back and be married?" Stanley asked.

"Well, what else?" she asked, faintly alarmed. "But there is just one thing I want you to promise me, Stan," said Shirley, jerking herself a little nearer him, and half-resting against his arm even while she faced him in the thick dusk, "And this you *must* promise me, because my entire life depends upon it. Now, I'm not going to say a word against Margaret Yorke," she began, in a mild tone; "she doesn't like me, and I am absolutely indifferent to her; that's all right—the world is big enough for both of us! But—listen to me, now, Stan, and then you can talk!—but *didn't* you ask me to marry you, down at the Cannons', at Pebble Beach, Stan, and haven't you written me dozens of notes, and sent me tons of flowers, and didn't your aunt approve, and don't our friends know all about it?" demanded Shirley.

"Well——" Stanley was beginning. But she interrupted him inflexibly:

"*Didn't* they? Answer me yes or no?"

"Well, of course!" Stanley said impatiently.

"Of course. Exactly! And now," pursued Shirley, warming to her subject, "now you act as if I had trapped you, Stan, as if you had been somehow bewitched into it!"

"My dear girl, how you do run on!" Stanley protested, laughing, but genuinely shocked.

"Don't laugh," Shirley said sharply. "Now you propose to get out of it, or you act as if you did!" she went on aggrievedly. "You *act* as if you did," she repeated, with a rising inflection, but as Stanley made no interruption her face darkened and she resumed resentfully, "You want to make me the laughing stock of my old friends; you want this whole crowd—just when I've come back here so simply and so quietly, to somehow make my own way again—you want to

give them all a chance to gossip about me again, to say that Shirley Wilson ran away with one man, and divorced another, and was jilted by Stan Crittenden!"

Stanley's face had flushed darkly, and she saw, from the look in his eyes, that she was gaining ground.

"Is it *fair*, Stan?" she asked agitatedly. "You can do it if you like, of course, but is it fair? What have I done—and what can I do? Nobody'll believe that you had no ground for it, except your fancy for this other woman."

"I see what you mean; I didn't see it that way!" Stanley said slowly, as she stopped for breath.

"But you do see it now, Stan? Why, what could I do? Where else could I go?" Shirley demanded, in a sort of anxious triumph.

"But here you are, talking of running off to Theobald!" he protested, weakly deserting the main issue.

"That has nothing to do with it!" Shirley reminded him promptly. "Stan, do you think you're in love with Margaret Yorke?" she asked frankly.

"I—I——" He stammered, turned brick-red, his voice suddenly thick. "I'm glad you asked me that, Shirley," he said, with more command, "because it would be very easy for you to misunderstand the whole situation. In any case, whether you and I were married or not, I couldn't marry her. She is not free."

"Married, eh?" Shirley asked interestedly. "And he's living?" she added, as Stan nodded. "I see. But of course she'd get a divorce for a chance like this!" she predicted bitterly.

"She can't—there are circumstances—promises. I don't understand it myself," Stanley explained lamely. "But she feels herself completely bound. So that's *that*."

"But you do love her, Stan?" Shirley persisted.

He hesitated, looked down at his big locked hands, looked up with an absolutely expressionless face.

"That isn't the question," he said stubbornly.

"You love her," Shirley repeated, and with a sudden deep laugh she added, indulgently, "or at least you *think* you do, poor Stan! Poor Tanny," she said playfully, "he thinks he is in love with every pretty girl he meets! But that's neither here nor there," finished Shirley, in a suddenly practical tone, "the point is this, Stan: you're the truest, finest man I ever knew. I depend on you. Now, you and I are to be married, either after I come back from the east, if I go, or immediately, if I don't go. I can't go back on that, or have any question of it, in all the agitation and trouble I'm in—with poor Cuyler dying, and asking for me, and everything. I've got to feel sure of you, you can see that? I'll go perfectly crazy if you annoy me with shilly-shallying back and forth—the thing's settled, and that's all there is about it!"

She stopped, but Stanley did not speak. Shirley peered at him; she could not see him in the heavy dusk. She stretched an imperative white jeweled hand and jerked the chain of a light; and she saw that he was again looking thoughtfully down at his hands.

"Promise me you'll play fair, Stan?" she asked, simply.

"My dear, what can I say?" he responded helplessly. "I tell you I think we've made a mistake!"

"Yes, but if *I* don't?" she breathed daringly.

Stanley shrugged faintly, bowed.

"In that case, of course you have the right of way, Shirley," he conceded gravely.

"The right of way," she reminded him smoothly and softly, with her smooth, soft fingers touching his; "the right of way over a woman you know nothing about, who appears from nowhere, who doesn't know anything of us or our crowd, who never would be accepted, and who confesses that she isn't free to marry! My *dear*, if ever you want to give me a real rival, please pick someone a little better suited to you than that!" finished Shirley, with an amiable laugh. "Now, let us

settle this once and for all," she presently resumed, as he remained silent, staring down. "Shall we be married tomorrow? That's Monday—we can run off for a few days, and be back for your directors' meeting on Thursday, if you like. Or will you be sensible and realize that a few weeks one way or another don't make much difference and let me go east and see Cuyler? Tomorrow, or six weeks from tomorrow, say?"

"I tell you frankly I think you make a terrible mistake in going near Theobald!" Stanley protested.

Shirley laughed, amusement and tolerance in her eyes.

"All right, you think I'm making a mistake, and I know I'm not," she granted him amiably. "I think *you're* the one that's crazy, throwing away a fortune like that! Why, it isn't as if I hadn't been the man's wife a year ago, Stan, and a reconciliation now will cost me only a few weeks——"

"Yes, I know your arguments," he interrupted surlily. "But I think it is extraordinary that you can't see it as I do!"

"Well, the dear old crosspatch," Shirley laughed, getting up, giving him a kiss on the top of his head, and assuming an air of consideration for his views as palpable to him as it was even to herself. "He thinks he knows best, always. And after we're married, you'll see what a devoted, dutiful little wife I'll be—what you say will be law!" she assured him, with maddening amiability. "But now I think I will run on to New York, and get some frocks, and just see poor Cuyler, and find out how the land lies! I should probably have to go on for the reading of the will, in any case, you know. And meanwhile, you'll play fair with me, Stan?"

"As you will," he said briefly.

"Promise?" demanded Shirley, her thinly-clad form close beside him.

"Very well—I promise!"

"No more flirting with Miss Yorke?"

"I have never flirted with her, Shirley," Stanley said coldly and wearily, and without another word he walked quietly from the room.

He went to his own, feeling upset and depressed, his skin hot and moist from the tea, his thoughts in a jumble, his heart lead. He heard the walkers come shouting back in the dark, great gasps, laughter, Margaret's delicious voice.

"Oh, I'm dead—I thought we were lost!"

"Uncle Stan—we found the bull!" he heard Jim shout exultantly, and he felt the sharp disappointment of a child. They had gotten up into the woods, he thought, enviously, and found the young Hereford who had strayed three days ago, and had had untold adventures. And Hyde-Brown had undoubtedly helped Margaret over the fences, and guided her, perhaps, when the sudden black darkness fell.

Meanwhile he had been riveting himself with new chains to Shirley.

"Positively, I can't believe we've managed it!" said Constance's fresh, unmistakably British voice, and Margaret answered, with her rich laugh, "Ah, we'll never forget the day of the big fog!"

Stan heard a diminishing murmur of hot water, changes of clothing; heard shutting doors. He went on with his dressng in miserable uncertainty of spirit, imagining a hundred conversations with Margaret: her incredulous scorn, his inadequate replies.

Shirley announced, at the bridge-table that evening, that she was planning a visit to New York.

"Stan thinks I ought to go," she said calmly. "He won't say so, but I know he does. And I never could be happy, myself, knowing that that poor boy had died, waiting and waiting for me to come!"

Margaret had been impressed into service in the game, while Willis Hyde-Brown was telephoning; now her blue eyes moved swiftly to Stan's and darkened as blue water

darkens when a chill wind whips it. She averted her gaze from his instantly, but he saw her color fluctuate, and a mood, like a tangible shadow, changed her serious face. The black lashes were half lowered, an expression at once patient and rebellious marked the sweet and sternly-disciplined young mouth, and on the thin cheek-bones two spots of crimson burned. Her slender brown fingers trembled, and she laid her cards face downward upon the table and linked both hands lightly over them.

She was suffering, and for him, he thought, watching the beautiful, expressive face. And a sort of spasm of love and pain seemed to clutch at his own heart and made him feel suddenly weak and dizzy and yet buoyed by a strange delight and intoxicated with new wine.

CHAPTER XIX

THE next morning, a cold, sharp, windy morning, with no trace of yesterday's fog left across the high, pale blue sky, Shirley seized an opportunity for a word alone with Margaret.

"We've had such a wonderful time here, Miss Yorke, or Margaret, which do I call you?" Shirley said appreciatively. "I do want to thank you."

They were in Shirley's room, and she was strapping and packing her bags busily. Margaret, standing in the doorway, felt the significance that lay under the friendly tone, and a hot wind seemed to touch her skin.

"I wanted to tell you something—explain something to you, rather," Shirley went on, setting her jaw over a refractory strap. "It seems only fair. I wanted you to know that Stan—Mr. Crittenden and I had a wonderful talk, yesterday afternoon. I explained my position fully—explained that it is wiser for me to go east just now, and he understands. I have his promise that it shall make no difference. Now, I can see—perfectly!—that you have been using your position here—— Don't interrupt me!" Shirley interrupted herself sharply, as Margaret made an inarticulate exclamation. "I see the *whole thing*," she went on angrily, her cheeks burning now, and her voice high. "Don't think I don't—I'm perfectly aware of it! So please don't waste your breath denying that you are madly in love with Stan Crittenden!"

Yet she paused, and looked at Margaret challengingly, as if for a reply, her breath coming hard, and her eyes glittering.

"I have done things for which I *might* apologize, in my

life," Margaret said slowly, in the pause. "But I do not apologize—for that."

"You deny it!" Shirley exclaimed.

"No," the other woman said thoughtfully, almost absently, "I can't deny it."

Shirley, turning her back upon the half-packed suitcase on the bed, looked at her in astonished resentment.

"You admit—you love—Stan?" she stammered.

"I don't think that has anything to do with it," Margaret said patiently.

"I accused him of it, and he promises me that it is *over*," Shirley said agitatedly, triumphantly.

"There was never anything to end!" Margaret assured her proudly.

Shirley continued to eye her uneasily, her expression a mixture of resentment, contempt and angry self-confidence. Suddenly Margaret raised her dark blue eyes, and with a change in her manner, said gently:

"I shall not remain here. It's only fair to tell you—we plan, Nora and I, to take Jim and go away."

"Ah-h-h!" Shirley said. It was almost the hiss of a snake. She hesitated, and her own face softened. "I'm sorry," she said awkwardly. And as Margaret was silent, she added, "You see how I'm placed. It's very hard for me. I *must* be sure of Stan, and if he's to be attracted by every pretty face——You see how difficult my position is?"

"Oh, yes!" Margaret said wearily. And turning she left the room, without a further word.

Almost immediately the departure took place. The car was at the door, and the women came out, looking strangely urban in their small helmet hats and dark suits. Stan was to be taken all the way into town; the Hyde-Browns and Shirley dropped in San Mateo and Burlingame.

"Get here in back, with me, Stan," Shirley directed, fussing happily with smartly white-gloved hands, "we can have a

talk, all the way in. So many thanks, Margaret," she said, leaning out. "It was perfect! Say good-bye to Margaret, Tanny."

"Good-bye, and thank you," Stan said, touching Margaret's hand. "*Dear!*" he added, in a tone that only she could hear.

Margaret's face was suddenly rich with color, and the protective hand that she put about Jim's little shoulders was trembling.

The engine roared; the car moved. They left her, standing tall and slender in the bright, whipping wind, with her blue eyes fixed half-wistfully upon them as they whirled away.

Constance, Willis and Shirley united in praising her. She was an exceptionally charming person. Constance even admitted that she was a British type; the high cheek-bones and big eyes, and the long brown hand. And her speech was oddly homelike, too, Constance said.

But when the Hyde-Browns were murmuring together on the front seat, Shirley snuggled confidentially close to Stan and told him that he mustn't flirt with Margaret while she was away, he must please be good.

"She's going away, too, she said so," said Shirley.

"Not for long!" Stanley answered uneasily. "She and the kid may go up to some hotel for the worst weather."

"She speaks very confidently of staying with little Jimmie," Shirley commented mildly. "Is it the idea that she shall—permanently, remain with him?"

"Oh, certainly!" Stanley assured her.

Shirley said nothing more at the time, but that evening, when they were talking together quite late, after a dinner, she returned to the subject. "Stan, it's Nora who really takes care of the child," she said.

"Yes, I know. But Margaret runs them both," Stanley offered, patiently.

"Yes, but, Stan—two of them for one small child! And

the rent of hotel rooms, or wherever they go—isn't that pretty steep?"

"My aunt left the little fellow a handsome income, Shirley."

"Yes, of course. But you'll be putting your hand in your own pocket, at that rate," Shirley countered quickly.

Stanley, annoyed himself, grinned, and so annoyed her.

"He's extremely lucky to have a woman like that so devoted to him!" he said.

"My dear, isn't that going to be a part of my job?" Shirley demanded prettily. "I wouldn't care, Stan," she added quickly, as he scowled. "I wouldn't care, if you hadn't admitted a sort of feeling for her! But she has been flirting with you, you didn't deny it, and now she assumes this passionate devotion to Jim, which of course keeps her right under your eyes!"

"I shall never separate them," Stanley said inflexibly. "I'm the boy's guardian, and that sort of thing is under my control."

"And you're under mine, but you don't know it!" Shirley said to herself confidently. But aloud she said nothing, contenting herself merely with a wise and significant smile. She had his promise, after all; he and she were on a firmer footing now than they had ever been in their lives. And she had ahead of her the exhilarating prospect of gratifying poor Cuyler's dying wish.

Shirley knew New York thoroughly; she knew where to buy shoes and violets and theatre-tickets; she knew all the correct hotels, and what to tip a head-waiter, and how to grasp the gossip—social, theatrical, artistic—of the passing moment. She liked to think of herself, arriving in the great city in a dark December dusk, of her taxi, her rooms, her first telephone message to Milly.

Cuyler had sent her daphne, in Paris, years ago. If she

could get a piece of daphne—and one could get anything at Thorley's!—she would send it to him, with her card that still bore his name, and a few scribbled words that would take him back to the Bois, and the pleasant clop-clopping of horses' feet under the chestnuts, in the spring.

And meanwhile, she had Stanley's promise; he understood her position perfectly. He would not go back on his word.

She kissed him good-bye at the train, on Wednesday morning, with real emotion.

"Tanny, somehow I think I'll make you a better wife, for—for not failing poor old Cuyler!" she said. "I'm that way, Stan, giddy and impulsive and an awful fool! But I've never thrown a pal down yet, and Milly's wire *did* say he was asking for me, you know, and I know—I *know*," said Shirley, with a faint, anxious frown, "that if I can once get by the nurses, and if that old ass of a Trowbridge hasn't put his fine Italian foot in, I'll not have any trouble with Cuyler. He's always been *crazy* about me. And, Stan," she coaxed him smilingly, at parting, "don't think it's the *money*. It's not. Honestly, that's the least consideration, with me. I do think," Shirley interrupted herself to say thoughtfully, "I *do* think that some of it is coming to me. What good is it to him? And I was his wife for more than three years—I gave him my whole life, Tanny, my youth, you know—the most precious years a girl has! A man *ought* to provide for a woman who has done all that for him, oughtn't he? And Cuyler will; he's the soul of generosity when he's himself! He was sick once in Rome, it was terrible. The doctors warned him then that he would have to stop drinking, and I used to sneak him little cocktails, and get him peppermints to take away the odor from his breath! Are you my porter?" Shirley added, without a change of tone, to the colored man. "Porter, I want you to take extra good care of me.—Kiss me, Stan. Good-bye,

you old lamb. I'm going to bring you a stunning present from New York, and I know exactly what it's going to be!"

Stanley, with a little grimace, retraced his way across the bay, found his car at the ferry, and drove moodily up Market Street. It was an undeniable relief to be done with Shirley, even for a time, but also it was undeniably humiliating to have his promised wife go away on such an errand, and to contemplate her triumphant return, and her complacent establishment of herself in society as part-heiress, at least, of Cuyler Theobald's money, and as Stanley Crittenden's bride. Just how gracefully, and with what superb courage, not to say audacity, Shirley would support both these positions, Stanley well knew. She would carry everything before her, especially with a magnificent private income to lend dignity to whatever she did. She would entertain and be entertained, rush about feverishly, flirt, dress, laugh, dash to Paris for hats, dash to Honolulu for some especially attractive party; she would, in a word, repay herself a hundred-fold for every slight and snub that she had ever borne, and he would be dragged beside her chariot as chief evidence of her complete success.

A week, ten days went by, and he did not see Margaret again. He made no effort to see her, although she was never for five minutes absent from his thoughts. All women suggested her, all places; sometimes voices, overheard in the street, suddenly brought to him the memory of her voice, and brought his feet, and his heart, to a standstill.

He must not see her. He was in honor bound. Yet every fibre of soul and body was pulling against him as he faced his long, blank day without her.

It was with an actual shock, one day, that he caught sight of her face, in town. He was passing the Palace Hotel; there was no mistaking the woman who had turned in, a few feet away from him, at one of the swinging doors. Tall, slender, trimly dressed in black, with violets pinned to her plain seal

furs, and her exquisite glowing face unusually demure under a small hat; it was Margaret, of course. Even in the moving crowd, and even though he had but a glimpse of her, he knew that it was she.

Stanley experienced something like a vertigo, and all the world held only Margaret and himself. He must get to her somehow, he must talk to her; hear the rich, positive voice, and watch the play of feeling in the sensitive, nervous mouth and the blue eyes, fringed so deeply with black.

His heart thumped violently; she was lunching at the Palace, he could find her—he surely couldn't fail to find her! He drove to a Montgomery Avenue garage, and leaped from his car, with his pulses thrilling and every sense tingling with eagerness, fear, perilous doubt and perilous hope.

There was the usual bright stir in the court of the big hotel: men coming and going, and furred women tripping in like birds, their eyes alert, every hair of their pretty heads and every thread of their handsome costumes accurately in place. Inarticulate boys were paging "Mister May—*sin!* Mizz' Follis! Mister May*sin!*" The entire group was moving so constantly, threading, returning, hesitating, briskly following a change of plans, that there would have been no possibility, Stanley thought, of finding Margaret there.

But she would not be there. His impression had been that there was a woman with her, and undoubtedly they were lunching. Stanley anxiously interrogated the head-waiters, his eyes roving the crowded tables as he did so. She had had violets on, and a sort of cockade on a sort of English riding-hat—and violets, yes, a young lady, yes, and he thought another lady had been with her.

Violets, and a cockaded hat. He paced the spaces between the big dining-rooms in deepening sickness of spirit. Suppose he had missed her! Suppose she and her friend were in the dressing-room, powdering their noses—girls took an endless time at that ceremony nowadays!

Or she might be telephoning? He could not be everywhere at once, but he could not—he could not, miss her! His distressed gaze continually pictured her: she would be sitting, so —or she would be walking, so, in the black gown and the English hat! She was not here—here—here—she was not anywhere.

She would smile when he found her; he could see the grave twitching of her beautiful mouth. He could see the upcurling black lashes that he had once seen stuck together, like a baby's, with her hot tears. The darling, the *darling*——

He had been three times fooled by a girl with a curly-brimmed hat: hang the fool girl, anyway, thought Stanley savagely. It was fifteen—it was twenty minutes—since he had seen Margaret, and she was not here. The maid at the dressing-room, pocketing a dollar, told him with pleasant civility that the lady wasn't inside. Was it Mrs. Theobald, she asked, dimpling? She knew Mrs. Theobald.

No, it was a younger lady, with a black gown and violets, and a sort of English hat——

The girl disappeared once more, returned with the same balmy, regretful smile. There was no party answering that description in the dressing-rooms. Stanley placed himself opposite the telephones and watched the booths until everyone of the dozen had emptied and filled at least twice.

No use. Margaret had gone.

Loitering, teased with sudden flashes of hope, only to be dashed down again, Stanley left the place. He would not even lunch there, he hated the Palace, he thought. He walked to the St. Francis, and on the way thought suddenly that very probably she and her friend might be lunching there. It would be delicious to sit down next to her and tell her all about his disappointment and his search. But it would be good to begin, mused Stanley, wearied and discouraged. Nothing else in life seemed to matter except that this chance meeting should not be lost.

The next day, quite unexpectedly, even to himself, and breaking the covenant between them, he appeared at the farm.

Margaret was taken unawares; he knew that she had been crying. She and Jim were in the roomy old kitchen; it appeared that Hang and Chung had departed for their monthly forty-eight hours in the city, and Margaret was chief cook. She wore a brief, almost sleeveless, almost shapeless calico apron, her cheeks were gloriously flushed.

The ride down had proved bitterly cold, and now the short winter afternoon was closing in. The roaring fire in Hang's big spotless range threw a little barred, rosy light upon the clean, pinky-white of the scrubbed wooden floor; outside there was lifeless twilight; it was evident that Jim did not think of and Margaret did not care for the lights. Jim was messing ecstatically in a blue bowl; Margaret was cutting ginger cookies. The kitchen was warm, odorous of the spicy cakes; the fire roared hearteningly, and in the half-light woman and child looked the embodiment of homely sweet domesticity and peace.

And she had been crying. Stan felt it rather than saw it, at once. He sensed it in her quiet manner, her slightly thickened voice, and the fashion in which she averted her face from his eyes, even in this dim light, whenever she could.

She knelt, opening the oven door, manipulated the big pans, brushed the hot cookies into a colander with light fingers.

"Well, you're comfortable here!" Stan said, with a sick premonition that she was angry with him. "But don't you want lights?"

"Not quite yet," she said simply, in her deep, thrilling voice.

She was angry with him, he thought, terrified. He shouldn't have come—he shouldn't have come! He was so cold that the delicious sudden warmth was making chilly shudders run over

him, and he felt a great weariness, and an overpowering disinclination to leave this seat at the end of the scoured table, with all the bleak wintry darkness of the ranch outside the panes, and all this purring, odorous, restful comfort shut within. But he could not have her angry.

He reached out a long arm, touched a switch, and instantly the out-of-doors vanished, and the kitchen was bright with lights.

"You've been crying, dear," said Stanley then.

She was standing beside him. Now, with a weary sigh, she laid one arm loosely about his shoulders, and Stanley put his own arm around her slender waist. For a moment they remained so, Margaret resting lightly against him, and not speaking. Stanley, on his part, was afraid to move or to speak, this moment of weakness and of affection was so exquisitely rare and precious. He felt that she was breathing deeply, and after a moment she sighed again.

Then she went back to her bowl, scraped from it the last batter, rolled the brown sheet trimly, punctured it with a cutter, and transferred the limp discs to a hot pan. Stanley sat still, watching her, his whole soul and mind and body one blazing pain of love and admiration. She was so sweet, so young, so infinitely dear in her crisp little calico, busy here in this fragrant environment of scrubbed wood and shining coppers; her dark eyes were full of suffering tonight, and her vivid, glowing body seemed eclipsed and subdued by some subtle disorder of her soul.

"That's the last of that!" she said, busily straightening and piling her utensils. "I don't know why, but about an hour ago, I felt a sudden need to make cookies. I've two hundred here, and you'll have to stop tomorrow with a box for the Leonard children—if you will—to save my face with Hang! He hates us to waste things."

She was talking with unnatural ease and quickness; Stanley answered her quietly:

"Of course I will!" He felt a wave of pity for her, a wave of admiration for her courage and self-control; he wanted with all his heart to help her regain calm and confidence. But for his life he could not help saying again: "You've been crying?"

"Women love to cry!" she said lightly, her voice thickening treacherously on the last word. And hastily and incoherently, to the child, she said: "Show Uncle Stan—tell Uncle Stan——"

Jimmie eagerly displayed the streaked mess that was presently to be blended smoothly into chocolate custard. Every time Hang went to town Margaret let him make chocolate custard, he announced.

While he talked of it Margaret poured milk upon his churning white and brown powders, and presently she stood him on a chair, at the range, and gave him a saucepan and a spoon to superintend.

Then she came to the now clean and orderly table and began to fit the big cookies neatly into a tin cake-box. Stanley reached for one, nibbled it, put it down, and suddenly caught at the bare warm brown arm, and touched it with his lips.

Instantly she was on guard, eyes and cheeks blazing, and he was standing too, his fingers still holding her arm, and her slender thin, beautiful body so turned that their eyes, over her shoulder, were only a few inches apart.

"Why were you crying?" Stanley said, not knowing what he said.

She did not answer. But the fire died out of her eyes, and he was horrified to see that she was about to cry again. She moved to the stove, and helped Jimmie with the completion of the custard, and gave him a cold wet bowl into which to pour it.

Jimmie sat down, rapt and admiring, his fat little brown hands holding the bowl steadily, his eyes never moving from the fascinating smooth folds of the cooling custard. Margaret left the kitchen, presently returning with lettuce and vegeta-

bles; she moved steadily about the dinner-getting; Stanley began to smell delightful things, freshly boiling coffee, salad dressing just tinged with garlic and onion.

He did not speak; Margaret did not speak. Jimmie, regarding his handiwork fondly, yawned prodigiously on his chair. The room was warmer, the fire purred placidly on, and Nora came out, lamenting the bitterness of the cold and predicting a black frost.

The child had his bread and milk at the end of the kitchen table, finishing his meal with the precious custard. But Nora would allow the older members of the party no such comfort, and Margaret, drooping and silent, found herself dining opposite Stan, in a dining-room warmed only by a newly-lighted fire. Tired, despondent, they dined almost in silence.

CHAPTER XX

AH, DO let us get warm!" Margaret said impatiently, almost pettishly, after the silent, uncomfortable meal, when she and Stan went into the living-room, which was like an ice-box. "I feel as if I had not been warm for years!" she complained, moving about suspiciously inspecting closed doors and windows, and finally huddling herself disconsolately in a chair. "I think I must be tired!" she said forlornly, with watering eyes.

Stanley, in an agony of sympathy and concern, piled the logs on the fire recklessly, the first heartening snap was heard, and then a volley of snaps and crackles. Outside, in the kitchen, Nora rattled plates and silver, and in his snug crib Jimmie slept, rolled into a ball, like a hedgehog. Stanley and Margaret had the shabby, homelike room, and might have had all the dark, frost-bound, starry world to themselves.

Gradually the stupid aching and heaviness of Margaret's limbs relaxed, and some of the ice that was packed about her heart melted, too. She felt the blessed heat stealing over her, and she sat passive in her deep chair, her feet stretched toward the blaze, her dark, brilliant little head resting against the cushiony back, and her shadowy curly lashes dropped upon her cheeks. Her hands, those living brown hands that Stanley never tired of watching, were locked in her lap; she looked like a young thing broken and spent.

"I've been doing too much today, and yesterday I was in town," she confessed. "I've been rushing about with Jimmie, and then, when he napped or rested, Nora and I have been accomplishing marvels. With Hang gone, one attempts too

much. I made poor-man's rice pudding for lunch, and that means stirring for hours. Battersby brought in a young turkey, and I dressed him to roast tomorrow, and then I tried to lie down, and nearly went mad, thinking, and suddenly rushed out and said that I would make some cookies. Too much!" finished Margaret, with an air of restoring matters to normal, and a cheerful smile.

"And you cried, dear?" Stanley persisted, his own heart so full of the pain of it, and the tragedy of it, that he could not spare her.

He was in the chair beside her now, and from the comfortable depths of both chairs they stretched their hands, and her brown, thin fingers were in his again and his whole being was thrilling to their touch as if they had been flames.

"Ah, my dear, my dear," said Margaret, after a long look, and a longer silence, when her blue eyes were on the fire, "you know why I cried!"

"Tell me," he said, trembling.

"I cried for the moon," she confessed. "It all came over me," she added, in a low tone, and with a gesture that indicated her slender self, outstretched in her chair, "it all came over me, how young I am, how long the years will be, and how I—how I want to belong to you! How I want to be everything that a woman can be, beloved and needed, and followed about the farm, and consulted, and laughed at—and that—that—" stammered Margaret, her voice suddenly thickening with tears again—"that it can't be, it's not for me! I'm forced to go away—to be alone—to waste all these wonderful years of living and loving——

"And it seems to me," she sobbed, burying her head in her hands, and bending forward so that her shoulders were bowed and her elbows on her knees, "it seems to me that I *can't* go away from 'Uplands,' to be all alone again, to try to make friends, to read just books and books and books—and to sit, in the evenings, when Jim is in bed, remembering you, and

how wonderful—how wonderful—you've been to me, and what you've given me, and taught me!"

Stanley sat like a man of iron; his teeth shut on his pipe, his arms folded over his breast, his grey eyes half-closed, and the fine beads of perspiration coming out on his upper lip, and on the palms of his hands. He neither moved nor spoke.

Margaret's voice died upon the familiar silence of the room: that comfortable winter-evening silence that was compounded of the sucking of the flames, the soft splitting of wood, the ticking of clocks, and, outside, the occasional bitter snap of wood under the icy clutch of frost, the clicking of cold, hard boughs, or the skitter of a dry leaf across the low roof. She sobbed brokenly for a moment, gathered her self-control desperately, dried her eyes, twisted in her chair to yield to a fresh rush of tears, drew great hitching breaths that stabbed into Stanley's vitals like a sword, and was presently silent, occasionally wiping her swollen eyes with the sodden ball of her handkerchief, and gradually restored to quiet, and then to shame.

"I didn't know you were coming down this evening," she said, in a casually conversational tone that steadied on every syllable.

"No," Stanley answered gravely, on exactly the same note, "I told you I wouldn't come. I didn't mean to come. But—but I saw you in town yesterday, going into the Palace, and I thought, everything considered, that this might be a good time for me to come down. I wasn't sure you were here again!"

This was anything but the truth; but anything to calm her, he thought, in actual terror of her tears. But he felt ashamed when she gave him a grateful look from the blue eyes behind those babyish, sopping lashes.

"You are the best man I ever knew, Stan," she said quietly. Stanley was alarmed to feel his own heart tramping within him like an approaching giant. His head began slowly

to turn, and a delicious languor pervaded his senses; he had a dizzy idea that anything he said would be fraught with extraordinary significance, and that all familiar bearings were vanishing in the rushing waters of an oncoming tide.

Fortunately—fortunately, he thought, as his own resolution went down in utter wreckage, Margaret seemed to have taken the wheel.

"Whatever brought you," she was saying, "it is most fortunate. Because Nora and I have been planning all day, and it was our plans—Jim's and mine, that took me into town yesterday. We go tomorrow. Yes, of course that's all I *can* do," she added quickly, as Stanley looked up. "I must go away for awhile, at least, until things here are—settled."

"Until I am married," Stanley supplied, suddenly hoarse.

"I suppose so," she conceded, very low. "I wish it might have been different, Stan," she said, not quite so steadily as before. "One hears of great love all one's life—but it has to be *felt*, doesn't it? My whole life, these last few days, is just you. I took your old tweed jacket today, to mend the pocket lining, and it was that— it was that—— I will *not* cry again!" Margaret interrupted herself desperately. "I was reading Shakespere today," she added, trying to smile, "reading Caponsacchi, and Meredith's poetry, and they all seemed—*pale*, Stan. I couldn't settle on anything. Romeo was you, and when Juliet met him, my eyes blurred so that I had to shut the book!" Her eyes were blurred again, but she was smiling gallantly. "It's richness to care this way, to suffer this way," she said in a different tone, as if she spoke to herself. "I went yesterday, and stood on the porch, where we talked on Sunday morning, and the miracle of it—of just *you*, all old tweeds and sunburn and—and grin——"

Her voice choked, and she was still. Stanley left his chair, and knelt beside hers, and laid one arm along the softly cushioned low back of it, and smiled at her.

"You wonderful—you glorious woman!" he said slowly.

"I love you so!" Margaret whispered, laying her face against his and linking her arms about his neck.

"Then that's all that matters!" Stanley said.

"No," she corrected him, pushing a lock of the mouse-brown hair into place and resting against him, "there's something else!"

"You mean, that I love you, with every fibre of my soul and body?" Stanley asked her.

Radiance flooded her blue eyes, as if the full magic of the old words had never reached her before, and for a long time they had nothing more to say, only occasionally repeating the enchanted assurance in broken, contented monosyllables, and clinging together in the silence and sweetness of the old room.

"You see, I must go away, Stan," Margaret presently said, so marvellously heartened and strengthened by the mere touch of his arms that she could speak in quite her usual quiet voice. "There is no way out—for us. It's just one of the things that has to be forgotten—outgrown. And I can never do that here! I can leave you, here before this fire, tonight," she said steadily, with a glance at her bedroom door, "as I *will* do! But tomorrow night—or a week from tonight, suddenly the whole fight wouldn't seem worth while. Shirley's rights, and the fact that my husband is living—even Jim's rights to look toward his mother for his code would all be so much *air!* You're the reality, dear, and it's taking every ounce of courage I have to remember that I may never belong to you! I've never felt this before, Stan, never. When I married, it was with I can't tell you what misgivings! He—my husband—was hurrying me and confusing me, and there was the question of a contract—either I was going to sign it, or I wasn't, and the manager was hurrying me, too! I kept telling myself that every girl felt that way. But now," she said, laying her brown head against his forehead again, "what it would mean to me, *now*—if you and I were free! It wouldn't

only seem sure, and safe, and right, but it would be the only thing that I could do—the *only* thing that wasn't just utter blankness and suffering and loneliness!"

"Margaret, Margaret, can't we wait! Aren't we making the worst mistake of all, ever to be parted again?" Stanley said, feeling that with agony and shock he was being re-born into this world of love and pain and renunciation.

"Perhaps we can, but I shall have to go away, anyway," she said steadily. "And, Stan, any day without you is a year now, and what weeks and weeks and months, and perhaps years, will be, I can't think!" she finished.

"There's no such luck as his dying—Yorke, I mean?" Stanley asked bitterly, of her husband.

"There's always that chance. And the chance that Shirley will change her mind," Margaret said. "But not now. We'll have to part now. I'll take Jim, and go somewhere——"

"But where?" he asked jealously.

"Oh, not far!" Margaret promised.

"You'll write?"

"Stan dear, to what purpose? We will have to wait, now. It isn't as if I were afraid of you, or you of me. It's all on the knees of the gods, now. Isn't it amazing—isn't it amazing!" Margaret said dreamily, "that Fate brings a man and a woman thousands of miles for this. From being Mrs. Cutting's nephew, who played polo and tennis, and wasted money, to think that you should come to be—*you*."

"Everything in the whole world resolves itself into just you and me," Stanley said, in a wondering voice. "If anyone had ever told me that, it would have been just words, to me. But you've come to be my whole life, Margaret, you *are* me, or I'm you, I don't know which! I can't sign a letter, in the office, without a sort of feeling of *you*—fluttering up in my face. I remember things you said, and they choke me, and make me get cold—I'll remember just the twist of your head, and it sort of blinds me! With Shirley, and with every other

girl I ever cared for, it's different. It's just one more thing, in my life. But the minute I leave you the only thought I have is, how to get back, and while we're together—well," Stanley said, with his pleasant grin upon his sunburned face, "the darnedest little things will just seem like miracles!"

"Does it occur to you how wonderful marriage could be?" Margaret presently asked him. "A young man and a young woman, going into a new home, and shutting the door. The world's full of it, of course; one passes towns and towns and towns full of pleasant homes, with gardens, and grocer's boys going in the side gates, and little cars in little garages. But when you love, and when you think what all that would mean with love behind it, then doesn't life seem too beautiful to be true! Imagine us, fixing our books on a wet Sunday afternoon, Stan, and feeling that all the machinery—ice-cream for dinner, and taking Jim into town for new shoes, and meeting for lunch, and planning for Christmas—all that machinery was moving about us, and that we were the Stanley Crittendens, before all the world!"

"*Don't,*" Stanley said.

"Jim's coming meant such misery to me," Margaret said. "I tried to be strong and happy and hopeful for my poor little baby's sake. But all the springs seemed broken. I couldn't be glad that I was to bear a child—to that man. I used to feel that out of sheer justice to the baby I shouldn't have given him life! But he came, Stan, and you see what a darling, sunny, giddy little idiot he is? He's just like my father, there's nothing calculating and cold and cruel in him. I know there never need be.

"But it makes me think," she went on, her eyes on the fire, and her cheek still resting quietly against his own, "it makes me think what it would be to bear a child to you, Stan, to have you as happy as I was over his coming—over them all. To come down here, for the long vacation, with a troop of them, my dear, and hear them calling 'Dad!' and 'Mother!'

—and to have a tiny, staggering one, in a white coat, and set her down on the lawn——"

"*Don't!*" Stanley exclaimed again, briefly and levelly, as she paused, her eyes brimming with quiet tears.

"That they *might* be, those glorious, welcome, noisy little girls and boys," she said. "And that they may not be! Isn't it a waste—a bitter, bitter waste! I go off, alone, to Inverness, and sit there on the beach watching Jim dig, and reading the *Atlantic*, and you and Shirley get rock-crystal and silver spoons!"

"My God," the man interrupted sharply, "I don't think I *can* go through with it!"

"And I don't think *I* can," Margaret said, smiling through a dazzle of tears.

"Margaret," he said suddenly, "there are islands, dear, there are little Italian hill-towns, there's Paris—where nobody cares! Or Barbados—you've never seen Barbados, with a grey storm coming up over the water, and the green hills. My darling, no one would know—no one would care! Jim's father would never find us there, and we could laugh at Mrs. Grundy! You won't get a divorce, I am promised to Shirley—it means wretchedness for three of us, perhaps four—perhaps five, for we have to think of Jim—this way. And *that* way means freedom for the man, safety for your boy, and Heaven for you and me! Margaret, it isn't as if marrying me meant happiness for Shirley. You don't know her as I do. There's no happiness anywhere for her. She'll like it, for awhile. She'll stick to it just as long as it's the best thing in sight. And I'll be one of those husbands—the world is full of them!—who keep the surface smooth, who agree and smile, and get into evening dress, and pay bills. There'll be no children. I wouldn't ask a woman who feels as she does toward children to bear me one, as a concession! There'll be no farm, except with a crowd of bridge-playing, chattering women along! I can't spend my life that way. I've grown up, Margaret. I'm

not even like the man I was six months ago—you've changed me, you've changed everything I think and say."

"I love to think that's partly true," the girl said, smiling. "But it only means this, Stan. We must wait."

"Yes, and if Shirley comes back all ready for the wedding?" he asked impatiently.

"If Shirley walked into this room now," Margaret countered, without answering, "I hardly see what you could say. You *have* told her that you would like to be out of it, haven't you?"

"She knows that as well as you do!"

"You couldn't delay it indefinitely, I suppose?"

"No, she's against that. It's her reëntry, you see," Stan explained ruefully. "She feels that she will be completely reinstated at last. She's been under a cloud here for ten years."

"If I were not here," Margaret mused, "then she would certainly be *more* willing to delay it, wouldn't she?"

"Well, I suppose she would."

"Then that's another reason for my going," Margaret said. "When she comes back—and I suppose she will come back, after she has had the talk she hoped for——"

"Oh, I think her idea was to stay with Theobald until he dies," Stanley said. "But he won't die!" he added, sceptically and heartlessly. "He's had these scares before. Now, it was just a grand chance for a reconciliation," he added, "and I think that the thought of the money—his uncle died about three months ago, it seems—has been fretting Shirley for some time!"

"No, I don't believe he'll die," Margaret conceded slowly. "And that means that she'll be back—right after Christmas, say. But if I am not here, and if in any way you could get her to delay things, Stan, that's our only hope!"

"Unless," he said, "unless you are brave enough and big enough to throw aside all the petty rules and regulations, and say that love is the great thing, and that you and I are

too big to lose the most beautiful thing in life—just because the Wylies and the Cannons and the Hyde-Browns have decided that there must be ministers and rings and licenses brought in!"

"You mean give myself to you?" Margaret asked thoughtfully. "As Shirley did to Tom Duncan," she added.

"What Shirley did with Tom Duncan," Stanley protested hotly, "was take him away from his wife and children and break Mamie Duncan's heart—that was the real offence! What you and I do gives happiness, not ruins it—we love each other. Margaret," he said, holding her close, "don't be afraid of me! I love you so that there is nothing else in life. Your happiness will always come with me before my own!"

"What a lover you are!" the girl murmured, smiling. And then, with a quick butterfly kiss against his bronzed, hard cheek, she was out of his arms, out of her chair, and had crossed to his own chair, in which she seated herself. "Sit there, in my chair, please, Stan," she said. "Please, or I shall go away!" she added warningly. "No, dear," she went on, calmly and reasonably, "I'm not afraid of you, and I'm not afraid of marriage—of life. It has come to me with fear and misgivings, and why should I be afraid when it is only Stan —the dearest, the closest and kindest friend I ever had, or any woman ever had! Better than love is trust, Stan, and you don't know how I trust you, how sure I am of always being safe and comfortable when you are managing things!"

The man, his arms folded, was regarding her steadily. Now there was no change in his expression, except a little twitch at the corners of his firmly-set, strong mouth.

"But it's myself I fear," Margaret resumed, after a moment. "I love you too much. Every time you loitered on the beach, my dear, in Barbados, or every time you were late for dinner, in our little apartment in the Bois, I should suffer agonies. I should feel that other women, wiser and stronger women, who had played fair by their vows, were winning

you away from me. I should feel that all your heritage of decency, and strength of character, and—yes, and purity, were pulling against me. I'd have no position, a woman who ran away with a man, after divorcing another——"

"You'd be married to me!" Stanley interrupted.

"Well, I might be, legally. But never in my own eyes! I would have broken my vow to God and to myself. I couldn't enter a drawing-room, as Shirley can, Stan, and revel in defying them all. I haven't the moral—or the immoral," Margaret interrupted herself, with a twisted half-smile—"I haven't the courage, anyway! I should shrivel, and shrink, and imagine that people were pointing me out. Yes—you're going to say that we wouldn't mind that, and I never should!" she interrupted eagerly, as he made a motion as if he would speak. "But *you* would, Stan, men always do. They always want to do the unconventional thing, and then become passionately conventional, and wonder why their wives aren't accepted, and get mad about it! I've seen it all so often, women putting up a good fight after they've made an irretrievable mistake!"

"Yes, but you're extraordinarily sensitive about such things, Margaret," the man argued. "Nine out of ten of the people you meet——"

"I *say* I am!" she conceded, interrupting. "I say that I've got to have everything clean and straight—baths every day, and clothes to the laundry Mondays, and babies learning the Beatitudes!"

"There is no earthly reason, because I am unfortunately engaged, and you are unfortunately married, that we should not start fresh and have all that, all the reasonable, good things, too!" Stanley said, stubbornly.

"You think you can!" Margaret answered, with animation. "But there are psychologic values—things that are the very fibre of your soul; and when some other woman—some woman one enormously admires—no," Margaret went on, in a low tone, "then one pays. One begins to explain, 'I didn't meet

Mr. Crittenden, you know, until years after I separated from my first husband——' And then men are different to one, too," she added, as Stanley was silent. "They have a certain familiar, easy, good-natured manner with the women who have failed—oh, I can't describe it! But it's there, it's even between you and Shirley, a sort of—of *knowledge* that you can approach her—a feeling that the bloom is gone, the reverence you might feel, that there isn't anything to revere——"

He had been scowling as he listened. But now his voice was low and even a little husky as he said protestingly:

"You keep a man up to a pretty high standard, Margaret! I didn't think there were any women in the world who felt that way any more! You make me feel—I admire you very much, my dear," Stan finished, rather tamely, blinking away a little mist before his eyes, and smiling at his own emotion. "And for the sake of that little girl-baby in her white coat, who is going to run on Daddy's lawn, we'll—I won't tease you any more, dear. We'll wait—we'll try to wait. I'll be square with Shirley—she has her rights, I suppose. And maybe she'll let me off, and if she does, I'll turn into an old bachelor, puttering about this place, fussing with chrysanthemums and pigs and heifers, and dreaming about you!"

He came over from his chair and knelt beside her again, and her blue eyes were very tender and sad and sweet, as she laid her thin, beautiful hand on his shoulder and said whimsically:

"God doesn't always make the right men kings, Stan!"

"My girl—my girl!" Stanley said, with a sort of sob, speaking between gritted teeth, tightening his arm about her, and crushing all her young sweetness and slenderness against his breast. "My darling!"

"And years from now," faltered Margaret, with the tears running down her face, "years from now, when we're much older, I'll come down to 'Uplands,' Stan, and we'll walk among the flowers together, and go up to the pool, and re-

member the day we dived into the water and came up together, and the morning of the big fog, when we knew that we loved each other, and tonight, when we had to say goodbye!"

And she locked her arms about his neck and buried her face in his shoulder.

For a long time they stayed so, without moving and without speaking. Margaret's breathing became more and more natural, and whenever Stanley looked at her eyes, they were fixed quietly upon the dying fire. He gave her his handkerchief, and she wiped her wet face quite simply, and restored it to him, once again resting the dark, soft fragrance of her hair against his shoulder.

Then she got up, and framed his face between her hands, and kissed him on the forehead, and went to her room. Stanley heard the door close, and for a long time there was no sound except the little noises in the sitting-room, and the occasional cold, winter sounds from outside.

He sat on, his arms folded, his firm lips shut in a hard line. Upon his lean, sunburned, boyish face there was a look of puzzled unhappiness, but there was no hint of faltering. If the key had been turned in that door, he would have heard it; she was not the woman to twist it noiselessly, afraid of his suspicions.

He had only to stride to that door, then, and throw it open, and surprise her at her hair-brushing, with the thin folds of some silky wrap falling about her, or perhaps find her at her prayers, with the dark hair braided and falling down her back, and her slender, vital figure outlined against the bitter, icy moonlight beyond her window.

She had confessed her love for him; she had cried. In his arms once more, she must surrender. Stanley did not analyze what he felt, there was no reason, no philosophy involved in it. He simply must see her again. . . .

He sat on, arms folded. Suddenly, out of the silence:

"Margaret!" he said.

The word died away into the air; a log split, and the little sucking of flames filled the stillness. Far up on the hills the coyotes were barking—barking. . . .

Suddenly every pulse in Stan's body vibrated. There was a stir behind her door. And then suddenly the whole world grew sane again; it was Jim's little voice, sleepily piping, and Margaret's rich soft murmur in answer.

"What waked you up, my darling?"

He went to the door.

"Everything all right, Margaret?"

Instantly she appeared, a dim light behind her, her dark braid falling over a long, warm woolly blue wrapper.

"Hang and Chung just came back," she said, in quite her natural, amused voice, "and Hang's alarm went off suddenly! It waked Jim."

If there was any self-consciousness in her, if she had been sharing his mood of irresolution and troubled longing, she gave no hint of it. She smiled her rare, deep smile and closed the door.

Stanley had wished to see her, and he had seen her. He grinned at himself somewhat shamefacedly as he went upon his own way to bed. There would be, he thought, tomorrow.

CHAPTER XXI

THEY decided, at breakfast, that their last day together should begin with a walk. Then Jim should be bathed and dressed, before lunch, and Margaret finish some small ends of packing, and immediately after lunch they would all drive into the city, Stanley leaving them at the Fairmont Hotel. And after that they would not see each other again.

Margaret decided upon this course of action resolutely; she seemed cheerful and strong this morning, in dark blue linen, with her rich hair severely brushed from her glowing face.

But her mood sobered, as time went on. There was a strange and exquisite beauty about these last hours, spent alone together, and in the place they both loved so dearly. The commonplaces they had shared so long were not commonplaces today. Breakfast was less like a meal than a sacrament; they watched each other wistfully, answered at random.

Stanley remembered that he did not know when her birthday was; Margaret knew his, of course. She had picked him out the fitted suitcase, in his aunt's day, and managed more than one elaborate birthday party on the last day of January. He seemed oddly fascinated with the thought of her own, and repeated the date in a dreamy tone, a dozen times.

"My mother's birthday was in April," he told her.

"And what was her name, Stan? I don't think I ever knew."

"Mary. Mary Burgess Crittenden," Stan said.

"I'm Mary, too," Margaret said, pleased. "Margaret Mary Regina. And my mother was Mary Rose. But she used only the Rose," she added. "Her stage name was Rose Irwin."

"Then you were Margaret Irwin?"

"Oh, no, Margaret Yorke. Dad's name was Yorke. I wanted —*nothing!*—from my husband, not even his name," Margaret said, coloring. "You know, years ago, when my mother used to talk to me about the future," she said, "she used to give me advice. She used to beg me to be careful about marriage: 'It's so easy to make a wreck of everything when you're young,' she used to say. 'And it's so bitterly hard to get out of the wreck!' All youngsters hear those things, Stan," Margaret added, thoughtfully, "but why is it—why *is* it—they can't seem to understand? I used to listen to my mother, and nod my head, and say, 'Yes, Mother,' and all the time, in my heart, there was a sort of comfortable conviction that things *couldn't* go wrong, with me, that I knew all my mother knew, and more besides, and that, no matter how silly I was, I could always get out!"

"I remember Aunt Hat talking to me, two or three nights after I got engaged to Shirley," Stanley mused. "Everything she said was true. She told me—or rather she asked me, sort of timidly, if I didn't think Shirley was a little worldly and not apt to settle down? All it did was make me furious. Every word she said seemed to hit me on the raw. I wanted to be rude to her and tell her that she was an old fusser—as a matter of fact I never for one instant let myself think that it might be true! If Hang came in here and began to tell me about you, I'd be about as much interested. I just listened, civilly, and said, 'I understand, Aunt Hat, but you don't get Shirley right, she's never at her best when you're around,' and that was all there was to it. I listened just as I'd have listened to any other tiresome sort of stuff, saying to myself, 'It's only Aunt Hat—let her rave on!'"

"Then the point is," summarized Margaret, "that there simply isn't any way that older people can reach younger ones. The words just don't register!"

"If Nature has gotten in her deadly work," Stanley agreed. "She softens them with some sort of mental poison, maybe,

just as they say a snake does the bones of his victim before he swallows it!"

"One moves in a sort of dream," said the woman; "other people talk, go about, other things happen. But the one thing in sight is that ruinous, imbecile, reckless wedding, and until that happens, they can talk to the air!"

After breakfast she and Jim and Stan went for a long walk, beginning with the familiar barn-yards and stables, and wandering on up into the woods. The morning was exceptionally warm, almost spring-like, alfalfa was already an inch high, and grass under the orchard trees an emerald film upon the rich, dark earth. Larks were giddily rising and singing, and Margaret gathered a few pale, untimely buttercups. There was great activity about the sheds and barns, milking was late, this season, and the herd was only now moving out of the milking-sheds.

Mounted safely on the high gate, the three watched them churn and crowd through the fenced passage that opened upon the fields. The big backs strained and bumped; there was constant lowing and grunting: Jimmie, his heavy woolly socks and snug overshoes dangling over their heads, shouted with untiring joy in this delicious safety that was so close to danger.

Shaking their horns, the cattle scattered over the faint new green of the hills, and Margaret and Stanley turned westward, climbed a four-barred fence, followed a cow-trail about the shoulder of the hill, and struck up into the forest.

Immediately they were in a jungle of oaks, madrone, wild lilac, hazelnut, and a hundred other low, sturdy growths. The ground here was sodden with damp, dead leaves, and Stanley had to find what passage he might between fallen logs, tangled dead vines, low branches, and the great orderly heaps of the wood-rats' nests.

After an hour of it, during which Jim had been triumph-

antly riding upon Stan's shoulder for at least fifty minutes, they reached the summit and sat down upon a dry log, in an open sunny space, to rest and get their breath.

The sun was hot, here, and the whole world was bathed in radiance and sweetness. There was a good smell of oaks, and rotting wood, and damp earth. There was not a cloud in the pale blue sky, the great grey-green mountain ranges fell away below them like the opened fingers of an enormous hand. Far down, in the valleys, a lonely farm, here and there, sent up a plume of pale-grey smoke into the sparkling morning air; nearer, the steam was rising from the sloping tangle of roof that was "Uplands," and Jim could identify the new windmill and the empty pool, and even the small forms of Tony and Battersby, walking past the barn.

The cattle were toys now, of red and white, and Hang, coming out to get a pumpkin, only another toy. Jim revelled in a sense of largeness, of superiority; his elders studied the stretching magnificence and beauty of the panorama with eyes as full of pain as pleasure.

"Margaret, if I must marry Shirley, I'll sell all this!" Stan said, with sudden bitterness.

"Oh, don't ever sell it!" she protested.

"Where will you be?" he asked, after a pause.

"I thought of Carmel, Stan. That's warm and quiet and near the sea, wonderful for the small boy. Or Inverness. I don't know anyone, either place," Margaret added, her voice shaking a little, against her will.

"I can run over to Carmel from Del Monte in ten minutes," Stan said.

"Then it won't be Carmel," she decided, with a rueful little smile. "It simply mustn't be that we are constantly meeting. If you dropped dead today I should somehow get over it, and that's exactly the way I must get over it—all alone. If you marry, I'll know it, never fear, and if you don't, and I am ever free——"

"If it isn't Shirley—and it *won't* be Shirley! it will be nobody, of course!" Stanley reminded her moodily. "If it isn't Shirley, it simply means waiting. There'll never be anybody else, I know that. It isn't any one thing I love you for, Margaret, any one thing that some other woman might have," he said. "It isn't being in love! It's everything, your wrists and your eyes and your voice, and the things you talk about, and your point of view, and the expressions you use, and the clothes you wear! I'd rather feel," Stanley added, presently, as she did not speak, "the way I feel today for years than go back to where I was before you came along and changed me! You make life wonderful to me—I just simply want to be where you are, and do everything I do with you, and meet you in town, and help you into my car, and discuss lunch with you, and tell you about the office, and dig in the garden with you—damn it all, damn it all, damn it all!"

The last words burst from him in a tone almost of despair; his voice shook. Immediately he sprang up, stretched a hand to the child, and started down the homeward trail.

Margaret followed him. The sun was veiled now, and the air was mysteriously cool and uneasy; the foliage of the live-oaks rustled, and a chill wind went over the world. The dogs whined, and when Stanley paused, in a thicket, to guide Margaret across a particularly tangled bit of wood, they saw deer, two does and a mottled fawn, leaping lightly and noiselessly away into the deeper forest.

Buck and Lily and Lady went after the deer, with mad barking and uproar, but they returned presently crestfallen, and contented themselves with earthing a red fox and covering their magnificent coats with a whirl of fine black flying dirt.

Back at the farm again, Jim was in splendid spirits, talking fast through Nora's hand and the washrag that were making his small face presentable for lunch. But Stan and Margaret's mood oddly matched the subdued, sad change that had come

over the bright day; the girl felt her muscles sore; her head ached a little; she felt cold. It was one o'clock already. At four it would all be over.

At five o'clock she was lying on a couch in the big hotel room, staring dully at the flowered wall, and the decorous mahogany furniture, and the big, freshly-curtained windows that looked down upon the grey, dismal wooden houses of San Francisco, and the beauty of the crowded piers, and the exquisite sweep of the bay, and the islands, and the hills.

Nora and Jim had gone out; the rooms were still. Margaret and Stan had parted, here in this room, only half an hour ago. They had parted without words, with just one quick and quiet kiss.

The girl's heart seemed to have been torn alive from her body; life was dark, empty, hopeless; she was dead. Stan's voice still echoed in her ears; the touch of his hand was upon her own; the memory of his big figure in the tweeds, his burned, lean face and twisted grin, was shutting everything else in the world away from her senses.

He was gone. Margaret could not cry. But the immense desolation of heart and soul and mind almost frightened her. It seemed physically impossible to get up, presently, to brush her hair, to order Jim's dinner and take even a faint interest in her own. She must, just once more, see him, speak to him, be near him.

She looked at the telephone. She could telephone him——

Even while she looked at it, the bell rang. The blood rushed to Margaret's face, her hands were cold, and she felt a sudden weakening and collapse. Nobody else knew that she was here.

Her hand was shaking as she took the receiver, even while she told herself that it was just the office, asking if she wished a dinner card——

"Stan!" she stammered, as the delicious, familiar voice fell upon her starving ears.

"Margaret," he said quickly, "I've got to see you!"

She did not speak. She could not speak.

"I'm coming up," he said. "I've had a wire from Shirley. She and Theobald were re-married again, this morning. She says he's much better and that she's the happiest girl in the world!"

CHAPTER XXII

HALF an hour later Stanley came into the big room again, but this time with a glorious rush of spirits, and bringing with him the chill sweetness of the darkening winter afternoon.

Margaret had changed to the black-velvet gown he loved; there were frills at her thin wrists, and the beautiful brown column of her throat rose from a square, babyish collar of old lace. Stanley kissed her quite simply, when he came in, and they stood, holding hands at arm's-length and smiling at each other.

"My darling! do you realize what this means?" he asked, exultantly. "I'm free!"

"But I'm not!" she reminded him, ruefully smiling. Immediately, however, her April smile broke out, and she said, "Stan, I *am* glad! It does seem to bring everything nearer, and it makes one feel that almost any change might come! Show me the telegram."

He took the crumpled yellow paper from his pocket, and Margaret read:

"Cuyler much better. We were re-married this morning. Know you will forgive me. I am the happiest girl in the world. Much love."

It was signed "Shirley." Margaret and Stanley read it more than once, marvelling at it, and trying to read between the lines.

"She got there Monday," Stan calculated. "She must have seen Theobald right away. She said that she knew she could do anything with him, if she once saw him, but by George—by George!" he added thoughtfully, "she didn't lose much

time! Well, that means a million to her, I suppose, and it means something worth several millions to me! I feel about eight years old. I could jump over the city! I never felt this way in my life!"

They sat down on the big davenport where Margaret had been lying, and locked hands, Stan's big free arm tight about her shoulder, and fell into wonderful talk.

"And now I think you must really tell me, my darling, where your husband is, and what he is, and how we can tackle him."

"He is alive," she answered simply, "and that is the whole story. But I have courage now," she added, "and I have hope! I can't tell you *why* I feel so, Stan, but I believe that by this time next year—I can't say that, either," Margaret interrupted herself, flushing nervously, "but I do believe that you and I are going to be happy, one of these days!" she finished, turning to him a face so sweet in its seriousness and intentness that Stanley kissed her suddenly, as he might have kissed a beautiful child.

"Can you imagine the scene?" Stanley said, luxuriating in the details that had secured him his miraculous freedom. "Poor old Theobald harried to death with doctors and nurses. Shirley floats in, all tact and tenderness, knowing his tastes, knowing all about him, having taken him through one of these bouts before! I can see her putting the idea of remarriage into his head, and then being immensely surprised when he took hold of it——"

"I can't believe it yet!" And Margaret's face expressed utter disbelief as she spread the telegram once more upon her knee and studied it with a slowly shaking head.

"And now, this will alter your plans, dear!"

"I don't see why," she said, a little startled.

"But doesn't it mean that you and the kid can come back to the farm?"

"I wish it did," said Margaret thoughtfully. "But—there's

you," she reminded him wistfully. "It's going to be hard for us both, waiting."

"Not if we're engaged!" Stanley suggested buoyantly.

"Yes, but we can't be engaged, Stan. Not openly, at least. And even if we were, people would think it was extraordinary, my living under your roof. And more than that, it *isn't* right," Margaret said.

"Could we get somebody to stay there with you?"

"Well, we *could*. But that's a big establishment, Stan. Hang and Chung, and Nora and Jim and me, and then a companion besides."

"My dear girl," said Stanley, "if you knew how rich I feel, how free I feel, tonight, you'd realize that money is a secondary consideration! Whatever establishment you have, do you suppose it's going to compare with what it would have been with Shirley as my wife? You get some nice old Grundy—— What is it?"—for she had suddenly straightened herself, with widening eyes.

"Stan, how about those old cousins of yours, the Peterses, from The Dalles—don't you remember that they came to your aunt's funeral and said that they might sell their house up there and live in a warmer climate? How about that? I liked her so much, you know, and the old husband, too. They could have the adobe, couldn't they?"

"I'll write 'em tonight!" Stan said, fired. "I'll wire them!" he amended.

The door opened, and Nora and Jim came in. Jimmie, cold and rosy and hungry, threw himself into Stan's arms, and a confusion of changes and meal-ordering followed. Jim had another bath and ate his supper in his wrapper; Margaret went into the adjoining room and changed her gown. Stanley, he had announced, was to take his girl to dinner at the Palace.

Mrs. Cuyler Theobald, radiant, surer of herself than ever, made a flying visit to California, in the spring. She left Mr.

Theobald, she explained, comfortable and well cared for, in the New York hotel.

"Happiness has just done wonders for him," Shirley, jewelled, dressed in the most exquisite succession of new frocks, explained to anyone who was interested. "He will never be well, poor fellow, and the doctors tell me frankly that another stroke would mean—" and Shirley always sighed deeply, paused, and shook her head over the words— "the end."

She had come out to see Cuyler's San Francisco agent, she said, for the bulk of the immense estates he had inherited were in California. But besides that, she was really a little run-down with so many weeks in the sick-room, and wanted to see a few dear old friends here who were rejoicing with her in her restored happiness.

The real reason for her coming, Margaret suspected, was that she would trust to nobody else the packing of her effects and the closing of the Ferguson house. What letters and papers were there nobody knew but Shirley. While waiting for her divorce in Los Angeles there had been a little affair on the side with a fascinating young movie star; nothing serious, nothing important at all, and yet Shirley wanted to destroy some letters. And then there was business relative to the divorce, and certain memorials of her years in Paris, before marrying Cuyler.

Altogether, Shirley wanted to clean house, and she could trust it to no hands but her own. The trip west was entirely delightful to her, and to reappear as a rich woman, safely married once more, in the circle in which her footing had been so precarious, was deeply satisfying. Shirley had several thousand dollars' worth of new clothes; the women she knew would not have been human to ignore them. They were all somewhat amused at Shirley now, anyway. She no longer merited serious consideration, she simply was Shirley Wilson, utterly without code, scruple or law.

One glowing April afternoon she drove down to the farm.

She had now and then caught glimpses of Stan, and she keenly enjoyed the dramatic possibilities of each meeting. Her upward glances were more eloquent than ever, and more than once she had hinted to him that she was anxious for a long talk.

"Because when you know exactly what happened, you're going to forgive me, Stan," she had told him, at their first meeting, when he came, tall and lean and grinning goodnaturedly, across the floor of the country club, to greet her.

"My dear girl!" he had said, deprecatingly.

"Not cross?" Shirley had murmured, with a flash of penitent brown eyes.

"Not the least in the world!"

"Shall I come down to the ranch some day, and perhaps we can talk?"

"I'll telephone you—you're with Elise? I'll arrange it," he had said, pleasantly.

She had not wanted the move to be left to him, but there was no help for it, at the moment. Shirley had opened the subject again a few days later.

This time she had been having tea with some women at a hotel, and Margaret and Stanley had come in. Shirley's eyes had widened a little when she had seen his companion, and almost immediately she had gone smilingly over to join them.

"May I break in on this party just a little minute?"

"We haven't ordered!" Margaret had said politely. Shirley had protested eagerly—no indeed, nothing for her, she was with the Ponds.

Reassured, Margaret had sat back somewhat silently and had left the conversation to the others, as Shirley had noted with a certain discomfort and resentment. She had never seen the ubiquitous Miss Yorke look so pretty, Shirley had thought. Margaret had worn a gown of dark blue silk, charming in the untimely heat of the spring day; her brown warm

skin and the lights in her dark hair matched her silk stockings and slippers. Pressed over her blue eyes, and the rich wave of her hair, had been a blue hat, and there had been pearl earrings in her small, close ears that made her look oddly older than her twenty-four years, oddly sophisticated and pretty.

"I was wondering if I was ever going to see you, Stan," Shirley had said. "This is the sixteenth, you know, and I must be back about the first! I went down to the oil-fields," Shirley, now occupying a chair, had told them amusedly. "It was great fun, and dear me, how they do coin the money, Stan! It almost scared me, little me, to be Mrs. Cuyler Theobald, and taken about from one head of a department to another, and introduced, and having cars put at my disposal, and everyone kow-towing!"

"You go back about the first," Stanley had repeated. To himself he said, "Two weeks more of you!"

"Well, I can't leave my dear old boy forever!" Shirley had reminded them, dutifully. "Look here, Stan, he had these re-set for me—this is just about a tenth!" she had said, opening her bag, and taking out a small box. "This package came from Tiffany's this morning," she had chattered happily. "Wasn't it sweet of Cuyler to tell them to send them on?"

And she had displayed a ring of two immense diamonds and an emerald.

"But this is only about a tenth," she had said. "The other jewels we can't touch until the whole estate is cleared up. Cuyler had his attorney in, and made a new will, the day after we were married. I didn't want him to. I said, 'For heaven's sake, don't *bother!*' But he would do it, and I think he felt happier. Now, the doctors say, if he takes care of himself he may live for years!"

"You won't have tea?" Margaret had been pouring her own. Shirley had not missed the detail that when ordering she had said to the waiter, "And our usual toast, Joe."

"Stan," the visitor had said abruptly, "if you won't ask

me to the farm, I shall just have to come, anyway! When shall I come?"

The bronzed, pleasantly lean face had turned to Margaret.

"Could we have a party for Shirley, do you think?"

Shirley had flushed furiously.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" she had said, abruptly. "I had no idea that Miss Yorke was still at the farm. I thought—just before I went away—that she was going somewhere else. But they told me that you had become a perfect hermit, Stan, and hardly ever leave the place, and now I begin to understand it!" Shirley had rushed on, with a nervous laugh. "If you have company there it isn't so bad," she had added, "but I supposed that Miss Yorke and little—what's his name?—Jimmie had gone away. I tried to get some news of this young man," Shirley had said, turning toward Margaret, and for the first time making an effort to include her in the conversation, "but nobody knows anything about him, and Elise de Vilbiss said that she thought you and the little boy had gone up to the Fairmont!"

"We did, for a few days," Margaret had told her, in her serene voice.

"But you went back?" Shirley had asked, with an air of pleasant interest.

"My aunt's cousin, the Peterses, of The Dalles, wanted to come down there for awhile," Stan had explained, casually. "He's a fine old guy, a doctor, retired, and she's nice, too. They're in the adobe. They're crazy about the place, and they play bridge, so we all get along finely!"

"I see you do," Shirley had said drily, with a shrewd look from one to the other. Well, I'm coming down anyway," she had announced, with a sort of discontented daring. "Would I be horribly in the way—let me see—a week from today?" she asked.

Margaret had glanced interrogatively at Stanley, Stanley at Margaret.

"Not at all," Margaret had assured Shirley then, smiling. And Shirley, angry and suspicious, had gone back to her own table half deciding that she would not go to "Uplands" at all.

But when the glowing April afternoon came, she drove down duly to the farm, with a trunkful of beautiful frocks, and with an escort to give her countenance, Joe Pond, Stan's closest man friend, a quiet listener in almost all gatherings, a widower with a little girl, and as enthusiastic a player of tennis, golf, and polo as Stan was himself.

Stanley himself had driven down from town earlier in the afternoon and was comfortable in his old tweeds, as he came out to meet them. He and Chung seized suitcases hardily; there was great shouting and laughing as the visitors were made welcome to the farm. But it was all spoiled for Shirley, because she instantly noted that Margaret was hostess in everything but actual name.

It was Margaret who said cordially, "We've put you in the room you had before, Shirley!" It was Margaret, looking young and slender in her short white skirt, and frilled white blouse, and apricot sweater, who introduced, decided, managed.

In vain Shirley tried to ruffle her; Margaret was serene. She was evidently adored by the cousins: a ruddy, silver-headed old country doctor and his mild, fat, amused old wife. Mrs. Peters was evidently a little impressed by the visitor's manners, poise and animation, but the doctor possessed the shrewd judgment won by some forty years of practice among human beings, and Shirley's charms gained almost no response from him.

Margaret, on the other hand, was a favorite. He treated her much as he would a daughter; there was much teasing, murmuring, confidence between them. And Stan, Shirley decided resentfully, acted toward the girl as if she were actually

his wife. They might have been an ideal family group; old people, young husband and wife, beautiful child, devoted nurse, she thought. Shirley supposed that there was an understanding between Margaret and Stan; she had suspected his attachment long ago; it was quite the natural thing.

When Margaret took her to her bedroom Shirley found it maddeningly complete: a bowl of banksia roses on the dresser, towels and soap, fresh window curtains, and upon the bed the same fat silk comforter under which she had been lying during that memorable talk with Stan, in the winter dusk, three months ago.

Shirley detained the other woman while she opened her suitcase and began to fling about the pretty contents: her silver flask, her cigarettes, her novel and slippers, her nightgown heavy with rich laces in strips and medallions, and the miniature drug store she carried for her beautification. She spoke of New York, the little shops near the Avenue, in the Forties and Fifties; she showed Margaret a little present she had brought for Stan.

"Dearest fellow in the world!" she said of him. And as Margaret did not speak, she stopped rummaging in her bag and looked at the other woman in well-simulated surprise. "Don't you think he's a fascinating person?" she asked.

"Indeed he is!" Margaret said, with her bright smile, and with the manner of putting off a small child.

Shirley eyed her discontentedly.

"I suppose you two are going to have some news for us, one of these days?" she said, suggestively. "Well, I shan't be jealous," she added, good-humoredly. "I shall never feel to anyone in the world what I feel for Stan Crittenden. But I had to do what I did—my husband is a sick man, and all alone in the world; it wouldn't have been—playing the game," finished Shirley, "not to have done it!"

Margaret said nothing. She thought that she would try to remember this speech, in its amazing entirety, to repeat

to Stan. But to Shirley she seemed to have nothing to say. Shirley simply didn't count any more, except as a legitimate source of astonishment and amusement.

Perhaps Shirley felt it, for she was more than ordinarily determined to please, this afternoon and evening. She tramped about the farm, on the usual before-dinner round, with great responsiveness and amiability. She appeared, dressed for the meal, in her most becoming frock; she was a study in tact, high spirits, charm and flattering interest during the meal.

Stan had his old place at the foot of the table; Margaret was in his aunt's old seat, at the head. Shirley was at Stan's left, and old Mrs. Peters at his right; Margaret had the men on either side. And Shirley told herself that it was perfectly sickening to see how this woman had worked her way in.

Pretty, confident, serene, Margaret filled the hostess's position splendidly. She drew them all out: Joe, the doctor, Stan himself. Shirley did not miss the undertones with Chung; the keen glance that Margaret sent to flowers, to lights, to all the appointments of the delicious farm meal. Shirley's most desperate attempts fell harmless; Stanley would not be lured into personalities; her asides to him were met by mere perfunctory replies, by his usual grin, and by his unmistakable straining to hear what was being said at the other end of the table. And Joe would not flirt and would take but the faintest interest in chatter of New York plays and fashions.

Afterwards, there was bridge. Mrs. Peters would only look on, but the doctor had been playing whist, bridge, lily bridge, nullos, auction bridge, contract, for some forty-five years, and he had the true card-lover's uncanny feeling for the game. Conventions meant little to the doctor, and his signals were few, but with Margaret for his partner he was ready to defy the world.

They had a cut-in game, Margaret begging off the first

rubber because she had to see Hang about breakfast, and Nora about Jim, and discharge a dozen other small domestic duties. When she came back she played with Joe; and then with the doctor. Stan, cut out, sat, Shirley saw, on the arm of her chair, and watched her play. The last rubber Stan and Margaret played Joe and Shirley, and Shirley, who felt that she had been losing ground all evening, was ready to cry with sheer rage and nervousness before the endless penalties, penalties, penalties were scored.

The old doctor, whose wife had gone to bed, was sitting beside Margaret now, and she fanned her cards in her thin, vital brown fingers and showed them to him, before she played. Stanley was evidently keenly enjoying the game; everything was going their way, Shirley thought savagely. If they overbid, Joe, who was a fool, invariably took them out of it; if she, Shirley, had a magnificent double, Margaret always jumped to a perfectly unexpected suit. Shirley began to feel outmatched.

She pleaded fatigue when the disgusting rubber was over, and went off to bed. But she heard the murmured voices and laughter of Margaret and the men for another hour.

Here she was, she thought angrily, married now to an enormously rich man, and, one might suppose, in a more powerful position than ever. And yet her status and that of Margaret Yorke had seemed to be oddly reversed since her last stay at the farm; Margaret seemed to be in power now, established here, in her nameless position, a hundred times more definitely than Shirley ever had been.

She went to sleep viciously determining upon a campaign against all this innocent placidity. Old Mrs. Peters was an unsuspecting creature, and the doctor's championship of Margaret was the gallantry of a simple-minded old man. Shirley wondered what the outcome of a few well-planted suspicions would be. Suppose she suggested to Mrs. Peters

that Stan was very ingeniously pulling wool over her eyes? Nothing like these small-town women for sinister suspicions!

Shirley could imagine the ruffled feelings, the quick confirmation of any hint of foul play. She smiled in the soft darkness of the spring night. Why not? she mused. She herself would be on her way east a week from today, the probability of her marrying Stan was extremely remote. Yet the possibility was still there. But at least it shouldn't be all smooth sailing for Margaret Yorke.

"I won't say that anything's wrong, I won't even say that I think anything's wrong," she decided. "But I shall simply hint that Stan admires her tremendously—for all I know," Shirley assured herself, bridling, "it *is* true. *I* don't know anything to the contrary! I know that Elise said that she didn't know what had become of Stan, nobody ever saw him, and certainly he and this girl looked very comfortable and domestic, having tea the other day!"

"I'm still in love with that man," she mused; "I'm still in love with Stan Crittenden. I suppose I always will be! That's the real trouble. Otherwise I could go on my way and leave him alone. Cuyler'll never be fit to leave New York, and I certainly will never live here again if I can help it! But it makes me perfectly *wild* to think of that girl getting him——"

And Shirley paused, to remember the feeling of his big arms about her, the touch of his kisses.

"Lord, what fun a woman could have with Stan, running down to Honolulu!" she reflected. "Del Monte for the tournaments, or a little bungalow at Pebble Beach; he's always so stunning, in any rig, and that silly, easy line of talk of his makes everyone love him, and makes any kind of party go!" And not for the first time she thought of herself with Cuyler's money, and with Stan for her husband. "If only he doesn't marry this Yorke girl, in the meantime," Shirley fretted.

"I'm only thirty, the best years of our lives are ahead of us, and there's no earthly reason—we've been engaged and broken it twice, and he's forgiven and forgotten. There's no earthly reason why a third time shouldn't be lucky!"

So the following day, at breakfast, Shirley announced that she was not going to drive into town with Stan, she wanted to stay another night, and really rest. Stanley, who was needed for a few hours at the office, was secretly relieved to be spared the long tête-à-tête of a drive into town. Joe Pond had already gone.

"We shall just loaf and gossip all day," Shirley said, trailing across the side-porch after him, in her lacy breakfast apparel, "and when—dear me, doesn't this sound like the bride?—when shall you be back, Stan?"

Margaret, at the foot of the porch steps, was superintending the agitated breakfast of the newest puppy, who was not taking too kindly to his bread and milk. She wore her shabby striped skirt and her short Japanese jacket; her earnest, keen, brown face was bent over the dog, and her lean, nervous brown fingers kept ducking his rebellious little nose into the dish. She looked up with her dark brows drawn together in a faint frown.

"This fellow's a dainty feeder, like his mother, Stan," she said ruefully.

Stan, to Shirley's disgust, immediately bent over the puppy as if nothing else in the world was of consequence.

"Whyn't you take him back to the mother, for a week or two?" he said, concernedly.

Margaret's face brightened, and she said eagerly:

"That's just—*exactly*—what I'll do! I'll drive Cousin Settie and Jim up there, and maybe the doctor will go."

"Shirley's going to stay tonight," Stan said then, and Margaret's face brightened just the correct fraction as she said, pleasantly:

"Oh, I certainly expected her to stay! And I thought you

were going to bring a man or two down? It's Friday, you know," she added.

"Well, maybe I will!" the man answered.

And for a moment the three and the sunny-headed child stood still, in the bath of strengthening spring sunshine; smiling vaguely at each other and looking down at the panorama of the farm, and the fields, and the scattered oaks, and up at the great encircling cup of the grey-blue mountains.

"It's going to be a gorgeous day here—it's going to be really hot," Stanley said enviously.

"I love these empty, pleasant days!" Margaret agreed.

"Ah, don't you? Don't you just love to dawdle?" Shirley said, stretching out her white arms, from which the thin laces and frail pink and blue silk streamers slipped, and raising her beautiful body on the tips of her toes.

And Fate, rushing upon all three, gave them a few more hours of ignorance in which to muse upon the emptiness of the sun-bathed, green world, and the high blue sky streaming with puffs of cloud, and upon the pleasant uneventfulness of the hours ahead.

Presently Margaret picked up the dog's plate and walked away, around the side of the house, followed by the eagerly questioning Jim.

"Some puppies are what they call shy feeders, Baby," they heard her say, "and we think perhaps that Binky's mother . . ."

The voice died away, and in the sweet stillness of the morning Shirley followed Stan to the low car and stood chatting with him, beside it.

"You don't know what this means to me, Stan, honestly," she said, smiling and blinking with a little emotion. "To be down here—it's just wonderful. I love it so! I love the feeling of being near you—you silly old idiot! Like you an awful, awful lot, Tanny," said Shirley whimsically, with her winning smile.

"That's lucky!" said Stan, chained where he was by the delicate little slipper that was laid upon the running-board.

"You know just how my marriage came about, don't you?" Shirley asked suddenly.

"I can imagine it!" Stanley nodded with a brief smile.

"Think I felt awful happy about it, Stan?" Shirley asked, with an upward sweep of brown eyes. "Poor little me, I cried all night. But he was so alone, Stan, and I remembered that he had always been so good to me—always, in his way," she said.

"How much chance has he?" Stanley asked, to say something.

But Shirley was not interested in Cuyler.

"To get well? Oh, none!" she said carelessly, dismissing him. "He may live some time though, poor fellow," she added, as Stanley looked somewhat scandalized. "No, but tell me," she went on, "were you angry at me, Stan? When you heard of the wedding, I mean?"

"No, not a bit," Stanley said honestly, and with some little embarrassment, after thought.

Shirley burst into a shout of laughter.

"Oh, Stan, aren't you terrible? Why, you uncomplimentary thing!" she gasped. But as his somewhat grave, considering look did not alter, she sobered suddenly and added: "Don't you know you should have felt terrible?" And immediately she rattled on, covering any possible silence on his part. "I wonder, Stan, if you didn't feel that this was the square thing for me to do? *I* did, I know. I thought, 'This squares accounts with Cuyler, he can't live long, poor fellow, and I'll be glad all my life that I didn't let him die angry!' *Don't* you feel that, Stan?" Shirley ended earnestly. "Don't you feel that—maybe—I did the right thing?"

"I'm glad if you feel so, my dear," he said, with his crooked grin.

"And some day will you be good friends with me again?"

"I hope I'm always that," Stan said awkwardly.

"Tomorrow's Saturday," Shirley suggested. "How about driving me in to lunch at the Burlingame Club? Could we do it? Awfully nice to watch some tennis, and have a cup of tea, and maybe a game of bridge. I'm an old married woman now, Stan, perfectly safe, you know!"

"Couldn't be done," he said briefly. "I've got a barrel of things to do here! I promised the kid, for one thing——"

Shirley had slightly drawn back and had removed the arresting foot. Now she looked him coldly in the eyes and said, with a faint smile:

"My God, what a hold that woman has on you, Stan! Be awfully careful that it isn't too much of a hold for your comfort, one of these days!"

Stanley touched his starter, jerked his gears, touched his cap.

"Thank you, Shirley. I'll remember," he said levelly.

"Now I've done it! He hates me. I don't care!" said Shirley to herself as he drove away. She drew a little frightened breath, and laughed nervously and scornfully, like a child. "I don't care, it'll make him think of me, anyway!" she said as she turned and went back to the house.

CHAPTER XXIII

AN HOUR later, innocently busy with needlework in the sunshine of the deep porch, she fell into conversation with the old Peterses. It was mid-morning; Margaret was busy elsewhere. The sunshine was deliciously warm and steady, but the air in the shade was cool, and the two old people were enjoying the streaming heat of the spring warmth upon their shoulders.

"I've known Stan since we were kiddies," Shirley said, by way of introducing the subject.

"So I understood," said the old lady. Shirley wondered how much more she understood.

"Last fall," Shirley pursued, with a deep, sudden sigh, "we were to have been married. You knew that?"

"Someone was telling you that at the funeral, Settie," said the old doctor.

"But my husband was dying, and he wished to be reconciled," Shirley went on. "It was a terrible position for me, terrible. But it seemed to me that there was only one thing to do: let him die in peace."

"I see," Mrs. Peters murmured, as something seemed to be required of her.

"Nobody will ever know what it cost me," Shirley said. "It meant giving up—Stan. And he has always been the most wonderful person in the world, to me."

"He's a pretty wonderful feller!" said the doctor, after a short silence, clearing his throat.

"He's a man that a woman—like that—can easily get hold of," Shirley said, lightly, feeling her way, and with her

bright eyes fixed upon them. "Because he believes in all women!"

Neither of the old people spoke; the doctor fixed a shrewd bright look upon her, the old lady coughed distressedly and nervously.

"Haven't you noticed that Miss Yorke is simply infatuated with him? Why, I thought that was a recognized thing!" Shirley said, in innocent bright surprise.

"She seems a real sweet girl," faltered Cousin Settie.

"We all thought so!" Shirley agreed quickly. "Even poor Mrs. Cutting thought so!"

"Wasn't Cousin Hattie real fond of her?" the old lady demanded, somewhat agitatedly.

"Almost to the end," Shirley explained. "And then she saw—well, what you all see. It separated me and Stan—I couldn't—I couldn't stand that! I know men are not like women, but right here, in his aunt's old home, it seemed so terrible!"

"There's nothing wrong between 'em!" said Cousin Settie valiantly, with two red spots on her soft old cheeks. She looked at her husband reproachfully, for help, but the doctor, after a long look at Shirley, had pursed his lips, and was looking down at the porch floor, whittling in silence.

Shirley realized perfectly that to him her little ruse was as a pane of glass, but she would not abandon the charge at this first rebuff. The old wife was uneasy, it was plain, and it was to Mrs. Peters that she directed her next remark.

"One feels that it is not—quite fair, of Stan," she said. "Either to her or to us. I spoke to him about it, last fall, and immediately he wrote you. But even that doesn't seem quite fair. Your being here, I mean——"

"Doctor and I knew he admired her. At least, we suspected it!" said Mrs. Peters, uncomfortably. "Didn't we, Doctor?" she asked, trying to draw her husband into the conversation.

"I respect the girl for mindin' her own business," the doctor drawled. "And I don't know but what we might's well mind ours——"

"You're very generous, Doctor," Shirley told him with a laugh, "and I think perhaps you're right: it's entirely their own affair. But you and Mrs. Peters are such lovely, old-fashioned people, church members, and all that, that I felt——"

"You don't believe——?" Mrs. Peters said anxiously to her husband, as Shirley paused. All her fears were aroused; there was a permanent flush upon her soft, full old cheeks, and her faded grey eyes looked alarmed and resentful. If Stan Crittenden, her own Cousin Hattie's husband's sister's child, had asked Leander and herself down here to cover up any such carryings on, then at least Sarah Peters need be a party to it no longer!

"Now, look here, look here, look here, Settie," the doctor said soothingly, amusedly, slowly.

"Don't think that I believe anything is really wrong, myself," Shirley said quickly and earnestly. "I don't! But a great many of Stan's friends do, unfortunately. I see them, you know, and that's what made me wonder just what you and Doctor Peters felt about it, and how long you were going to stay, and all that! No, it's Stan's business," she added, indulgently, "and it doesn't concern us a bit—does it?"

"Well, in a *way* it doesn't!" Mrs. Peters agreed, with a little shocked and angry laugh. "But in another way—my gracious!" she reflected, vexedly. "I declare sometimes I think Doctor and I are a couple of babies!" she broke out. "It wouldn't occur to us in a thousand years ever to think of such a thing! I've always known that a man with lots of money——"

"I wouldn't get myself all worked up over it, Settie," the doctor said. "We know Marg'ret, and she's one of the nicest,

sweetest girls I ever saw—she's something like our Dolly. I don't know as I'd worry myself——"

"Yes, I know, Doctor," his wife said pathetically, faintly impatient. "But isn't that the worst sort? You and I don't know anything about her except just what Hattie knew——"

"And that's enough, that's enough!" the old man interrupted. Now with an angry glint in the shrewd old grey eyes he turned to Shirley. "Don't worry yourself to say one more word on the subject, Mrs. Theobald," he said sternly. "Mrs. Peters and I are warned, and thank you kindly."

Shirley, smiling but scarlet, subsided and busied herself with her needlework, tossing her head and slightly shrugging her shoulders. Mrs. Peters looked in some surprise, and even with a little trepidation, at the kindly old face she knew so well, the firm old mouth, and the leonine grey mane. "Doctor" wasn't interested in this amazing theory about Stan and Margaret Yorke, then? the old lady thought, a little shamefacedly.

In her own little group in The Dalles she would have pursued the topic interestedly for hours, perhaps for days, undoubtedly coming eventually to the conclusion that Marg'ret was a dear, sweet misjudged girl, but enjoying all sorts of shocks and speculations on her way to that conclusion. But now Leander had shown some heat about it, and Leander knew far, far more than she did about folks, and she was entirely satisfied to accept his judgment.

So she instantly aligned herself with him, casting a faintly resentful glance at Shirley, bridling, and flushing now with virtuous indignation rather than with suspicion and uneasiness. Silence reigned for awhile, in the sunshine and quiet of the porch. Shirley, deep in her being, laughed contemptuously. The fight was not lost yet; this old couple might begin to think over what she had said, and to worry about it, in spite of themselves.

"And for all I know," she reminded herself, "it *is* true!"

She presently got up and sauntered away in the sunshine, and after awhile Margaret came out, looking charming in a striped linen of blue and tan and black, and tousling Jim's wet, clipped little fair head under a big towel.

And as she sat down and turned her glowing, thin, beautiful face, and her shining, black-fringed blue eyes toward the old couple, she noted with surprise and pleasure that their manner toward her was more than ordinarily affectionate, almost parental, and her bright color rose, and her own manner became its sweetest: grateful, responsive, and happy.

Stan, with a possible guest, was expected in mid-afternoon. It was about three o'clock when Margaret, with Jim, wandered out toward the front porch to wait for him. Jim was brave in clean clothes and wore his big white sweater; Margaret looked her prettiest. There was always something delicious to her in this awaiting. Even these brief absences on Stan's part cost her something, and it was wonderful to know that presently the faint mellow sound of his motor-horn would float through the afternoon air, and then the nose of the rakish grey car swing into sight, and then the big man in his belted coat, and with the familiar grin upon his brown-red, lean face, would jump from his seat, and—and be home again.

That was all she wanted: just to have Stan near. From the moment he arrived everything was different. There was a new thrill to the simplest detail, to fires and supper and the excursions about the ranch, when he was there. He told them the city's news, they discussed the books or magazines or newspapers they had been reading; they had a thousand jokes, a thousand meaningless little phrases that during these past happy months had come to be fraught with significance and fun.

Margaret, darning his big grey-blue golf hose, dreamed of him happily. There were to be ducks for supper—that was

all right. She had brought up the currant jelly herself, and placed on the table a great bowl of the delicate wild cream and lavender and purple iris. There was a bowl of ivory trillium in the sitting-room, and violets on the piano, and great branches of pungent wild currant bloom over the mantel.

Spring was creeping over the world, and spring was creeping into her heart; she felt it lift and swell with every daily miracle of deepening grass and clustering apple-blooms; the larks were singing to Margaret this year, and the very baby chickens that cheeped and scattered in the baby weeds, the rushing of brooks in cool twilights, and the drifting odors of buds and warm earth were ecstasy to her.

Shirley was lying down; Margaret supposed the old couple to be resting, too. But Jim had his primer, and was painstakingly following the fortunes of the Sunbonnet Babies. His mother looked at him, and a great wave of gratitude and love swept through the deeps of her very soul. He was so small, so unconscious of any inherited or threatened evil. And yet he was so manly, too, with the hard little hands that had lost their baby bloom, and the hard little scarred knees that seemed to exude as well as acquire dirt, and the hard little cropped head that endured bruises and bumps so bravely.

Looking forward, she wondered when she would tell him his own history? When would the baby name of "Margar" be changed for the most wonderful word in the world? If it might be soon, he would never remember any other name; he would never remember that he was once Mrs. Cutting's little boy and that his small beginnings were strangely complicated and confused.

In that case, perhaps he would be a man, and ready for his inheritance, before his mother told him how it was that he had once been Jim Cutting—or perhaps, thought Margaret, with suddenly flaming cheeks and a fast-beating heart, perhaps Stan would like him to be called Jim Crittenden.

Miracle, miracle, miracle, of a woman's love for a man, she mused, her needle pausing, and the word Jim had so slowly spelled dying away unheard upon the air. And now the forerunners, sorrow and shame and hurt, had deepened the miracle!

"I wonder if every woman ought to be unhappily married, first," Margaret thought. "What do girls know of marriage —what *can* they know? Good heavens, how sure one feels the second time!"

Her thoughts ran on; she saw herself married, she knew just how wonderful she could make life, for Stanley, when that day came—as that day would surely come!—when she might go to him and say: "Now I am free!"

Tony was coming up, in the farm wagon. He had had to make a special trip into town today; Margaret could see that he had mail; he always wedged letters visibly into the upholstered seat.

She took the letters from him with a smile, running them through her brown fingers. Peters, Peters, Crittenden, Crittenden, Crittenden. Something for Shirley, forwarded from Burlingame, newspapers for Stan. And, yes! a telegram for Miss Margaret Yorke.

She opened it slowly; and the bright day flashed and shook, and her mouth filled with salt water, and her hands turned icy. Slowly the reeling green hills settled into place: this was just the familiar farm—the barn roofs in sunshine, the sheds and fences, and the great trees in new foliage.

"My God—my God—my God!" she whispered. She put the yellow paper back into its envelope, locked her hands in her lap, and sat back, trembling, her eyes closed, every particle of color drained from her face.

Jim came over to her, touched her, curious and faintly alarmed. And suddenly she opened her eyes; strained her young arms about the child's little body; laid her ashen face against his bright hair.

"My darling—my own boy!" she said, over and over. And then, "Oh, my God, I thank Thee! Oh, my God, I thank Thee!"

"Margar, I read the whole page, nine words," Jim said, gently and anxiously. "I read one word with seven letters in it."

She looked at him as if she did not hear him, yet with a painful intensity.

"It was 'baskets,'" Jim further stated, expectantly.

"That is wonderful, my darling," Margaret said then, not moving her eyes. But when he had gone back to his book, she opened the telegram again, and spread it on her knee, and read, over and over, the brief strange words.

"Party in whom you are interested died this morning, Roosevelt Hospital, eight-fifteen," she read. "Will wire you more fully tomorrow. Arranging my affairs to leave at once for California to protect your interests."

It was signed merely with the letter "T."

The giddiness had passed, but Margaret felt dazed and weak. She was grateful for the surrounding stillness of the world, grateful even when Jim strayed away after the Airedale puppy.

It was over: the bitter struggle that had broken her heart, that had eaten away six of the sweetest years of her life, that had taught her to fear and to hate.

He was dead; the man she had married on that bewildering and exciting day six years ago, the man who had shamed her clean soul as ruthlessly as he had taken possession of her young body, the man whose incoherent words, whose thick breath, whose insistent arms, had sickened her again and again and again.

She remembered her honeymoon, and her heart stood still. She was eighteen again, daring and confident—and married. They had motored to Atlantic City; the sea was rolling, low and dazzling blue, beyond the tumbled and trampled

sands, the boardwalks were swarming, the warm air was thick with odors of scents and perfumes, with smells of popcorn, and peppermint, and broiling sausages, and the strong incense from the Turkish bazaars. There was an incessant noise of laughter and voices, of scraping feet and scraping chair-wheels, of horns and bells and whistles, and of the steady measured crashing of waves. And men and women and children, thousands of them, were surging up and down, up and down, eating, idling, wearing light garments all wilted and soiled after the burning day. The first pink and blue evening lights were pricking through the bright ending of day when Margaret and her husband went through the foyer of a great hotel and were whisked up to those big, airy seaside rooms, filled with sunset light, and with cruel big mirrors, and with brilliant cretonnes and creaking wicker.

Margaret, here alone, in the peaceful spring afternoon, on a California farm, leaned back in her chair and shut her eyes. She would think no more. He was dead. He had not known—how should he?—what a girl's heart and soul could be. She could forgive him now: he was dead. The only person who shared with her the memory of that terrible day—of the next day—and the next, was dead.

She read the telegram again. Died, in Roosevelt Hospital, this morning at quarter-past eight. He had grinned at her timidity, he had mocked her, disbelieved her, crashed through all the reserves of body and soul—but he was dead, now. The recollection that still brought the hot blood to her proud face, the recollection of him laughing at her tears, the memory of her own dazed senses, only three days, four days, a wife, of that hideous sea, and those insensate crowds, was strong upon her in this hour of release. The bitterness of her own helplessness and despair in those old days rushed over her again.

She remembered the satin-lined, lace-curtained city apartment in which she had been lying, heart-sick and rebellious,

upon that smothering hot September morning when the conviction had first come to her that there was to be a—Jim. Carrie, the colored maid, had brought her black coffee, and in the spasm of mortal revulsion that had seized her the first suspicion had come.

Had that girl, tear-stained, shaken, desperate, anything in common, Margaret wondered, with this happy, beloved woman who was sitting here in a bath of California spring sunshine, six years later, with this telegram opened upon her knee? How safe, how infinitely peaceful, this haven seemed, this plain old pioneer ranch-house, compared to the dreadful luxury of that!

The man who had never known it, but who was Jim's father, had come into that bedroom, six years ago, as he had had a hateful right to come, and had stood in a blaze of merciless sunshine and heat, looking indifferently at the wretched girl on the pillows. To her sick and swimming senses he had seemed like a great toad, in his mottled green golf clothes, with his lead-colored face, and his bullet-head that was already bald.

He and Harry and a couple of girls were going down to Atlantic City, he had announced. And she, Margaret, was for God's sake to look a little less like a dish-rag when he got back. It was enough to turn a man's stomach!

Had it been the titanic hold of that new vague fear of hers, that had raised her, dizzy and faint, in her bed, that had nerved her for the terrible words?

"I—you must see it, too! There's no use in this. I want to go away—anywhere. You're—you're killing me! If you'll give me money enough, just a little, for a few months, until I can get an engagement again—I'll never trouble you any more!"

He had looked at her hatefully, this frog-faced man in his expensive, hideous green golf clothes; his little eyes had narrowed hideously.

"Done and done!" he had said. She had known that his friend, and the two women with whom they associated, were waiting, downstairs, in the broiling September heat, waiting while he took out his check book, and shook his gold pen, and wrote her that check for five thousand dollars.

He had given it to the awed and obedient Carrie to hand to her. He had not even said good-bye.

Margaret remembered the feverish hurry with which she had pulled herself, shaken and trembling, from bed. She remembered the clothes that she and the maid had hastily selected; Carrie meanwhile reminding her kindly that it wasn't like she wasn't ma'ied, good and regular, and prophesying that she would be back befo' week's out. Lots of the ladies Carrie knew got mad and went off, but, Laws, if they all wasn't back befo' long.

Margaret, sick and shaking, had staggered out into the terrible heat, had found herself in a taxi, on a boat, driving at last toward the blessed peace and obscurity and poverty of Mrs. Packer's five-room cottage. The hot toast and thin, boiling tea, served from a white deal kitchen table, were in her grateful thoughts today. A long, delicious night in exhausted sleep, while thunder rocked the world, and rain slashed against the low roof: how delicious that had been!

She remembered rising, weary and dazed, but oddly at peace, in the burning clear heat of the new day; she remembered days and weeks when her weary body and soul had seemed capable of no effort, had seemed utterly broken. Dragging herself to bed at night, rising late, dreaming in the hot little picketed garden, weeping often, and often spending long, dulled hours in speculation as to the coming of her child, Margaret wondered now how she had lived through that strange, dark time.

And then came a clean drug-scented hospital corridor, and a big bright room with a high, fresh bed, and a crisply-stepping little nurse who had seemed to Margaret the incarna-

tion of everything brisk and independent. Would she herself really be trim and agile again? It seemed unbelievable, upon this quiet day of pain and long delays, bewildered obedience, dragging hours.

Snow had been fluttering, fluttering down past the high windows, fluttering upon scuttling motor cars, and briskly moving women, furred and busy—happy women, whose lives had not gone down, at twenty, in loneliness and shame! Margaret would always associate the first shy flutter of a great blizzard with the flaming agonies of that strange and lonely afternoon.

And before the streets were cleared of that same heaped, unmanageable whiteness, she was at the window again, but sitting in a big chair this time, with the miracle that was Jim in her arms. The world was made anew. A glory and a beauty trembled even over the unlovely winter street, there was hope again; there was exquisite immeasurable joy again.

And if it was torture to recall Atlantic City and the great satin-lined apartment in Riverside Drive, at least it was all wonderful to remember that hospital, and Jim's first little pink double-gowns and blankets, and the milky clean smell of him, and the soft little clean powdered hand that lay so restfully against her blue-veined breast when he fell asleep after his meal.

Not all a wreck—not all a wreck, even in the hardest and saddest parts, while she had him! But almost—immediately there had come that terrible hour when, caped and bonneted and peacefully asleep, he had been brought to the door of the bedroom where she lay suffering and dazed, and she had said, from fever and pain:

"Don't bring him nearer! Even babies get it. Good-bye, my Jim. Good-bye, my own baby!"

CHAPTER XXIV

WELL, it was over. The play had ended, on the balmy spring afternoon that found her at "Uplands," peacefully established on the porch, mistress already, except in name, of everything she loved, and with her heart brimming with a deep happiness and security that embraced all the years to come, even to the end. The cruel journey had ended here, in this safe harbor, with her boy's fair head bent over his primer, her own hands busy with Stan Crittenden's golf-hose, and below her the panorama of barns and fields and great oaks that of all the world seemed to her just home.

And thinking all these things, she came out of a deep study with a sudden, violent shudder, and bowing her dark head upon her hands, she said, over and over again: "Thank God!"

And still her thoughts went on and on tirelessly, weaving backward and forward, starting always from this unexpected crossroads. She was a child again, moving about with the stock company; she was a girl, flirtatious, self-conscious, perfectly aware of the romantic position she was in, in this company of actors, elated over her first little parts.

She was fatherless, motherless, still only a child, half daring and half afraid, upon that March afternoon when a handsome, rich, insolently-secure young millionaire, in his woolly red coat and with his shining limousine behind him, had sauntered into her life. How she had admired him! His easy presentation of gifts that made her gasp with excitement, his tipping of waiters and his planning of parties. He had always loved parties——

There was a familiar whirring, down toward the lower gate: Stan's car. Margaret's heart began to hammer again, and her mouth tasted salty. It should be so easy to tell him! Yet she was trembling in every fibre of her being, and she could not seem to get to her feet.

The sudden realization of her love for him rushed over her, for the first time unchecked. No barrier now, no more mystery and evasion! She could go into his big arms, cling to his protecting shoulder; she could raise her face to his now, and kiss him, and soften, and yield, and surrender, at last!

He came in sight; he was alone. Trembling, and watching him as if she were fascinated, she sat still, waiting for him. She saw the sudden flash of white teeth in his bronzed, lean face, she saw him jump out, as she had seen him a thousand times before, yet never without a thrill. The big gloves were pulled off, crammed into his coat pocket, he raced his engine, shut it off, and came up to the porch.

"Eminently successful!" he said, of the blue and black and tan linen.

Margaret found herself utterly unable to rise; her spine was cold, and her throat suddenly felt thick and hot. There was no reason for this—there was no reason for this—she thought confusedly, but she was apparently going to cry.

"Stan——" she stammered. She put the crumpled telegram into his hands. "Stan——" she faltered, as, without looking at it, he took it, his concerned gaze continuing to rest upon her face. "He's dead!" she said, weakly.

Stan moved his eyes indifferently to the telegram, shrugged. Then he looked keenly at her again.

"What's the matter? Who is it?" he asked solicitously. "You don't look well—what's the matter?"

"He's dead, I tell you!" Margaret said, with a weak laugh and a weak rush of tears. Her face broke, her lips shook. "He—read it. He's dead."

Stanley snatched the telegram again, drank in its contents

with one glance, flung it from him, and caught her in his arms.

"Who is?" he cried, with a sort of shout. "My God, my God—you don't mean your husband? You didn't wire me—you didn't wire me—my God! Tell me—tell me!"

But Margaret could tell him nothing, for she was crying bitterly in his arms. Stanley's own eyes moistened; there was a moment of incoherent stammering, laughter and tears, before he said:

"Here, my darling, my beautiful, beautiful girl! You mustn't cry—you mustn't cry now. Why, it's all over, dear! He's dead, he can never trouble you any more. I know, I know," Stanley went on pitifully, wiping her eyes gently with his big bunched handkerchief, "it makes you feel badly—it's broken you all up, and no wonder. But when you're over this first shock—my sweetheart, you mustn't cry. Think of what our lives are going to be now, my darling—my own heart!"

Her face was still averted, but her sobs were quieter, and Stan could kiss the soft clouding of filmy hair at the dark temple. Margaret rested against him, gradually restored to self-control, but grateful for every second of this time in his arms.

They started and turned, but Stanley did not release her when Shirley came suddenly out to the porch. Shirley was radiant in pale blue silk, with gold and pink ribbons and the foam of laces about it.

"I heard your car—— *Well!*" she said, her astonished eyes not missing the traces of Margaret's tears, the agitated faces of both Stan and Margaret, and the man's big arm still held protectingly about Margaret's shoulder. "Well!" Shirley repeated, with an interrogative lift to her half-laughing, half-outraged voice.

"Well," Stanley echoed joyously. "Congratulate us, Shirley. There's no use disguising anything—I'm too happy!

I'm only afraid I'll die of happiness! We're to be married, Shirley, Margaret and I—it's all arranged, it's settled. You're the first to know!"

"Oh, on the contrary, everyone knows!" Shirley said, lightly and sharply, after a very perceptible pause. "I congratulate you, I'm sure. And you, Miss Yorke. We've all been wondering exactly why you chose to keep us in the dark, all this time! But I'm sure I hope you'll be happy."

Margaret's face was pale, but into her eyes a light had come that Stanley had never seen there before. She turned to Shirley and spoke gently, almost pityingly:

"There was a reason, Mrs. Theobald. I was not free."

"I see!" Shirley said, trembling, although she smiled. The game was lost now, and Shirley, who had lost many games before, had no thought but to withdraw as quickly as possible. But suddenly it seemed to her that in losing Stan she let go of everything she needed. "I wonder if Tony could drive me—or perhaps Rudolph would—to Menlo Park," she said, not very steadily. "I've got a tea, and a dinner, and a thousand things to do. I'm leaving on Tuesday, you know. I have to get back to my poor sick boy. He's probably frantic at me already!"

"Surely Rudolph could," Stanley said, cheerfully obliging. "But wait a minute—I must get hold of Cousin Settie——"

"Just—just a minute," Margaret said, turning paler, and putting out an impulsive hand to detain Shirley. She glanced at the telegram, lying on the floor; she sent an entreating look toward Stan, who was puzzled and disturbed by her sudden agitation. "You—you are too late, Mrs. Theobald," she said. "Cuyler Theobald died this morning, in the Roosevelt Hospital, at quarter-past eight o'clock."

Shirley looked quickly from one to another, her breath coming between parted lips, her color changing.

"What do you mean, Margaret?" Stan asked, in the dead silence that followed.

"I don't believe it!" Shirley said flatly. "Was there a message? Who told you? Who opened my telegram?"

"It's true," Margaret said, faintly.

"Then you're—then you're——" Stan whispered, staring at her. "My God!"

"Yes," she answered, her eyes on his, "I'm Peggy Irwin, of course. I'm his wife—his first wife."

There was another silence. A cow lowed, and was still, and lowed again, off toward the farm. Bees buzzed in a cloud in the blossoming apple-tree near the porch; the rays of the descending spring sun streaming through the delicate pink and white blooms, and the fuzzy pale green leaves.

Margaret, Shirley and Stan looked at each other. Shirley was the first to speak, on a contemptuous laugh.

"I don't believe it!"

"It's true!" Margaret said, reddening under her warm brown skin.

"It's nonsense!" Shirley said hotly.

"It's true," the other woman said again.

"You mean that—that you were Cuyler Theobald's first wife?"

"We were married six years ago."

"You were not! You'll have to prove it," Shirley stammered.

"I can prove it."

"Stan knew?" Shirley asked suspiciously, with a glance.

"Nobody knew."

"Well, I don't believe it!" Shirley repeated, narrowing her eyes, scowling, staring into space. "You mean that you *happened* to get a job with Cuyler's aunt, and *happened* not to be recognized?" she asked scathingly.

"It wasn't quite accident," Margaret admitted, after thought.

"I never heard anything so ridiculous!" Shirley persisted. But without much conviction.

"Your husband was Cuyler Theobald?" Stan demanded.

Margaret nodded, swallowing.

"Then *you* were the actress he married?" Stanley stated rather than asked, holding Margaret's shoulder in his big grip.

"I was Peggy Irwin—Rose Irwin's daughter," Margaret assented, her tone a little frightened. "My father's name was Yorke. But my mother kept her stage name, Rose Irwin, and they used to call me 'Little Peggy.'"

"Your husband is—was—Cuyler Theobald?" Stanley asked again, slowly.

She nodded; her eyes suddenly brimming; she could not speak.

"Then all this time," Stanley said, stupefied, finding words with difficulty, "all this time—you—you—— And you never told me!"

"I never told anyone, Stan. I had promised—I had sworn, never to tell!"

"Promised him?"

"Cuyler?" How readily she said the name; in all the confusion and stupefaction of his thoughts he felt a little thrill. "No; Trowbridge, the old lawyer," she said.

"Trowbridge! But why?"

"Because he knew of Jim, Stan, and when I thought I was dying, when the doctor had told me that I was sinking fast—when I felt that—that awful feeling that influenza brings, then I sent for Trowbridge," Margaret said.

"You knew him?"

"Knew him? Oh, yes, he was the Theobalds' attorney. He was like a sort of guardian to me. From the very beginning he was my friend; he used to reason with Cuyler, try to influence him. And I went to see him a few weeks after our separation. He was in the hospital the afternoon that Jim was born. He told me then that Mrs. Cutting was looking for a baby to adopt, but I wouldn't let Jim go—then. And later,

when I was so ill, when I did give up the baby, I swore that it should be a secret if I died or if I lived. I had to keep it so! The newspaper story would have ruined him, and perhaps given Jim, or a share of Jim, to his father.

"Living, Stan," Margaret said, in an eager rush of words, "I would always have cared for my own baby, somehow. I didn't want money for him! But dying, I thought of leaving him, so tiny, so helpless, and without a friend or a penny. And then I remembered that Mrs. Cutting was his great-aunt, and that some of the family money was rightly his—poor baby, it seemed unfair both ways, to give him his name, or to keep silent! Finally, talking to Trowbridge, I told him that nobody in the world knew who he really was, and I gave him the name of Jim Field, and they took him away to be adopted! Trowbridge sat beside my bed and swore that he would never betray the baby while Cuyler lived, and I swore that I never would betray *him!*"

Shirley had been looking in utter astonishment from one face to another, her face an angry red, and her eyes flashing.

"Stan, you don't believe all this!" she stuttered, at last. "I never heard anything so ridiculous! Why—why, how do you know all this is true? You don't know anything—who is Jim? I never heard of him! And Cuyler—is it probable that he wouldn't tell *me* that his aunt's companion——"

"I don't think you understand, Shirley," Stanley said, in his gentlest tone. "I've been somewhat in Margaret's confidence, you see. Mrs. Cutting never suspected anything, and I never knew until this instant that Margaret's husband was Cuyler Theobald——"

"We were married on the eleventh of March, four years ago—more than four years ago, Cuyler Theobald and I," Shirley asserted hotly. "I don't care what sort of a ceremony he went through with——"

"His marriage to Margaret came first, Shirley," Stanley

interrupted her, mildly. "His little boy was born before you ever met him——"

"He went to Paris," Margaret explained, "and got a divorce there. But his divorce, granted by the French courts, is not valid in California."

"What do you *mean?*" Shirley said, turning white.

"I mean that I refused ever to give Cuyler Theobald a divorce," Margaret asserted. "He tried to force me, tried to buy me off, but I would never consent. He is legally my husband to this day, or was——" She stopped, paling a little, glancing at the telegram she still held in her hand. "It cost me my freedom," she presently added, "and made it impossible for me to remarry. It cost him his, too. Trowbridge warned him his French marriage would never be recognized in America until he had an American divorce too, but Cuyler didn't care! He knew, I daresay, that I wouldn't ever trouble him! But Trowbridge has kept me informed; he looked into the whole matter because of Cuyler's child."

"Child! He has no child!" Shirley said, breathing hard.

"Jim is his child," Margaret said, with a quiet air of stating merely the simple fact.

"Jim! You mean this child here?" Shirley exclaimed. And immediately she began to shake her head slowly, and to smile a superior smile. "My dear Miss Yorke, you will find yourself in for a long fight on that score," she said kindly. "It'll take you years to prove it—it'll drag through the courts like the Whitson case and the De Ferrari case! How do you possibly expect to prove that this boy, whom Cuyler Theobald never saw in his life, is his son? They'll simply laugh at you—it's impossible!"

"Even if it were, I don't think I should feel too badly," Margaret assured her, unshaken. "It was his father that I feared, and now poor Cuyler is gone! Trowbridge has been watching Jim's interests ever since he was born, and even told

Cuyler's uncle, I believe, that there was a son. I think Trowbridge wrote me that before Cuyler married—in Paris——"

"Married me, you mean?" Shirley interpolated sharply.

"Yes, four years ago. I think Trowbridge wrote me that he had written Cuyler that it could not be a valid marriage, here in this state, and that as all Cuyler's properties were in California he would be disinheriting his second wife——"

Shirley was ashen; she told her sick heart that this was all sheer nonsense, and yet this woman had a strangely intimate knowledge of Cuyler and his affairs.

"Well, this is ridiculous!" she said lightly, "and you and I will be town's talk for the next few weeks. But I wouldn't congratulate myself too soon, if I were you! There are splendid lawyers in this state, and my father's daughter isn't quite a stranger to them. You may swallow this whole, Stan, but I assure you that *I* shall fight—fight to the last ditch! I was married to Cuyler Theobald in Paris, and I was married to him again, a few weeks ago, in New York. There is such a thing as a wife's claim, and I'm going to find out exactly what it is! I'm sorry to have to go, but—as his widow, I may have to leave for New York tomorrow," finished Shirley, trembling, but assured and assertive to the end. "I'll pack now, Stan, if you don't mind," she said courageously, "and if you'll just tell Rudolph?"

And she swept indoors; leaving the ecstasy of long-awaited joy on the porch, for Stan and Margaret sat down quite simply upon the old wicker sofa, and the man put his arm about Margaret's slender waist, and held her brown, thin fingers captive in his big hand, while the flood-gates of their starved hearts were opened at last.

Shirley, shaking, and gritting her teeth as she packed, found them there when she came out an hour later. Stanley put her into the car, and Margaret waved, and the man grinned in farewell. But Shirley, still flushed, and with dangerously bright eyes, was settling herself in the limousine,

and apparently forgot to nod good-byes. Erect and smart in her caplike black hat and black furs and new suit, she swept from their view.

Then Margaret and Stanley went slowly along the buttercup-fringed lane toward the woods. And during that memorable and matchless walk, and during the dreamy, unreal dinner-hour, when all the old people's questions must be answered, and when Margaret half laughed and half cried as she tied Jim's napkin, and pushed in his high chair, there seemed to be no end to their happy quiet words.

Later, when all the house was still, except perhaps for the pen of Cousin Settie, who could not sleep until she had scratched off at least an outline of this extraordinary story for the benefit of her married daughter in The Dalles—later, Stan and Margaret had their old chairs, theirs at last, securely, and to be theirs for many, many years. Their hands were locked again, and their eyes met and smiled, and moved toward the fire, and came back to meet again.

"Now you know everything, Stan," Margaret said, with a deep sigh of utter relief. "It's been like a bad dream, keeping it all to myself, and frightened that at any moment somebody might recognize me, or that in some way we might be discovered. It's been like a big calamity, an earthquake or a wreck, and I still feel utterly exhausted and dazed by it. But one thing is safe: my boy is mine, and about the rest I don't care. If Trowbridge is right, he'll inherit, through me, a good deal of property. But we'll keep him sweet, Stan, and sane and simple, if we can. And besides——

"Besides," amended Margaret, looking at him suddenly, with a gleam of laughter in her blue eyes, "he may not get everything. We'll—we'll circumvent him, if we can! And when we tell him of his inheritance in money, we'll be sure to warn him, too, that he has another inheritance, to fight and throw off, if he can! But I'm not afraid."

He looked at her, simple and earnest in her childish velvet

gown with the deep collar falling back from the beautifully rounded brown throat, and the thin, nervous hand playing with the long string of crystals that he had given her some weeks ago. And Stan thought that if it could be possible to love her more than he had been loving her, he would love her so now, when she proved to him the single-minded greatness of her hopes for her child, her indifference to his mere money inheritance, and her passionate determination to save him from the taint of his father's influence.

He thought of Shirley, coming back into his life less than a year ago, childless, rich, beautiful, cold and ambitious, and of the strange play of fate that had dismissed Shirley only this afternoon, discredited, uneasy, completely unsuccessful, and that had established this quiet, cryptic, wonderful being so securely here, never to be a stranger to "Uplands" again.

His wife, he said to himself. And almost immediately he said aloud, with a whimsical smile:

"It seems that I am making a brilliant match."

"I don't know," Margaret answered. "You are marrying an ex-actress, an ex-governess, and a woman who had no better sense, at eighteen, than to fall in love with an utterly unscrupulous, utterly intemperate, utterly heartless man, just because he knew how to order a dinner and got his clothes at Voight's!"

"Voight has made me clothes," Stanley objected.

"Ah——!" the rich voice said joyfully. "But that's different. Poor Cuyler," she added, thoughtfully. "I wish I could mourn him—I wish somebody could. But I don't believe anyone, unless it's his valet, Noon, will!"

"Let us hope Shirley won't," Stan suggested. "I suppose she may be in earnest about the lawsuit. It's a lot of money."

"The money doesn't matter!" Margaret reminded him again. "Trowbridge thinks we can settle that out of court."

They did not revert to it. But for a wonderful time they

sat murmuring together, Stan's chair touching hers, his knee crossed and his big body twisted about, Margaret close to the arm of her chair, her whole slender body crouched and slim, and her fingers interlaced with his.

They talked of their marriage, and he saw her flush, and saw the swift lowering of her thick black lashes, as she agreed that there need be no waiting now. No changes at the farm, no new clothes, no plans at all, until "afterward."

"I may have to go into town for a few days, if Trowbridge comes west, Stan," she reminded him.

"Yes, and then we shall have it all very quiet, shall we? At old Saint Mary's? And afterward," said Stan, "I shall bring you here, and the holiest and most wonderful associations of our lives will be kept safely here."

She raised the smoky lashes and gave him a long look.

"Yes," she said, "I think I should like that best."

And she looked quietly back at the fire. But at the thought of what it would mean to him to bring her here, some day, as his wife, in her belted coat and her furs, and to have her lay them aside, and move about these plain old beloved rooms quietly and at home, with the platinum band shining upon her slender, nervous hand, Stanley felt a sort of ecstatic dizziness, as if the air about him had suddenly broken into millions of stars.

He told her that she was a woman of infinite surprises. From the reserved, friendly girl who had been his aunt's almost unnoticed companion, to this vivid, thrilling central figure in the real drama of his life, he never tired of tracing the gradual development. They amused themselves by remembering their first antagonisms, the first bewildered beginning of their friendship, the confused and puzzling first meetings, when they had so inexplicably found their hands linked, and Stanley's arms about her, and Margaret's all-unwilling responses to his unexpected kisses.

It seemed to both a miracle that had brought them to-

gether, that had gradually merged that old dislike into this absorbing and overwhelming passion. Stanley tried to recall the Margaret of a year ago: what she had worn, what she had said, and wondered amazedly where his eyes and ears had been while this wonderful woman was moving within sound and sight of him. And for his eager hearing she pieced together the strange pattern of the last six years; fitting detail to detail until he could grasp the astonishing whole.

He found her no less surprising now, he told her, and he watched her with a sort of fascination as she rose serenely to the demands of the extraordinary change in her fortunes.

Stanley was with her on the day when Shirley and a San Francisco lawyer called. Shirley had engaged Mr. Whitman, an old friend of her father, to protect exactly what rights she had in Cuyler Theobald's estate.

The talk took place, by appointment, and with a great air of informality and friendliness, in Margaret's big rooms in the hotel. Stanley was forcibly impressed by the difference in the two women, as it proceeded.

Shirley was swathed in deepest mourning, her fair skin was only faintly rouged, and her mouth reddened; she looked exquisitely pretty, and it was obvious that her father's friend, who was not more than forty, after all, was already somewhat in her toils.

Margaret wore black, too, but with her usual transparent collar and cuffs, and with Stanley's splendid ring. She seemed very simple, and young, bareheaded, and with her dark hair swept smoothly from her low forehead, beside Shirley's crêpe folds and floating veils.

"There is no reason why we shouldn't just talk it all over and agree frankly and fairly—I hate fights!" Shirley said prettily, striking the note of the conference. "Because, after all, a divorce is a divorce, and a marriage is a marriage," she added, with a more definite note of controversy in her tone.

"Your position, as the divorced wife——" the lawyer began

heavily, to Margaret. But Margaret, who was plainly bewildered, turned her innocently interrogative gaze upon him quite simply.

"Mr. Trowbridge will be here next week," she said, "and he will know. He writes me that it isn't a question of divorce—there was no divorce."

"Oh, now, that's nonsense!" the lawyer assured her, smiling. And Shirley said eagerly, in a high triumphant tone, "I like *that!* Why, not only in Paris—but right here in America, two months ago——"

"Well, I don't see that we gain much by talking it over," Margaret said mildly, as Shirley came to an indignant halt. "We can't settle anything, really. When Mr. Trowbridge——"

"Yes, and it's extremely likely that he won't see me!" Shirley interrupted hotly. Her attorney shook his head, smiling a lawyer's serenely superior smile.

"You underestimate the force of your position, Mrs. Theobald," he assured her. Shirley was glad to be encouraged. "I *think*—Mr. Trowbridge—will hardly evade seeing you," the lawyer added, significantly.

To this, to Shirley's disappointment, Margaret made no satisfactory reply. She merely said, in a somewhat puzzled voice:

"I don't see why he *shouldn't!*"

"You realize, Stan," Shirley said, attempting to strike a spark from him, as Margaret proved so apathetic, "you realize that it is an extraordinary situation. Here is Cuyler's first wife, divorced, and with a child he never even *knew* about, and here am I, his second wife, who spent *years* trying to cure him, and rushed on to New York—everyone *knows* that," interpolated Shirley pathetically, "and now it's a question of my rights, you see that?"

"Your rights are perfectly safe, Mrs. Theobald," her lawyer said soothingly. For Shirley's voice had grown agitated,

and her color was high. "It is merely a question of having the whole thing friendly, avoiding—" went on Mr. Whitman, with a fraternal nod for Stan—"avoiding newspaper talk, eh?"

"Don't you think so, Stan?" Shirley asked agitatedly. "Doesn't it seem to you best to settle it out of court?"

"My dear girl," Stanley assured her, "I don't know anything about it. But what Trowbridge has written Margaret is that her claims and her child's claims, under the California law, are perfectly safe. She gets half the estate, I believe, will or no will."

"I think you may be mistaken there, because of the divorce Mr. Theobald secured in France," George Whitman said warningly, and yet with an eager appreciation of having drawn Stanley into controversy at last. He and his client had seemed to monopolize the conversation heretofore.

"I may be!" Stanley conceded, with a shrug. Shirley looked at him with anger and discontent, looked shrewdly at Margaret, who was serenely seated, deep in her chair, with her interested but not concerned eyes moving from face to face.

"You were wonderful," Stanley assured her, later, when the others had somewhat flatly and resentfully taken their departure, with much satisfied assertion that their confidence in their own case was unimpaired.

"I suppose it's because I don't care," Margaret mused.

"You really don't, do you?" he asked, smiling.

"Well, Stan, with you, and Jimmie safe again, and all the horror of secrecy and fear gone, what could I possibly care about?" she asked quite simply.

"The money," he suggested, deliberately, watching her.

"The money!" She dismissed it joyously; her thin brown cheek was against his, and his arm was about her.

CHAPTER XXV

A WEEK later old Trowbridge arrived, and Margaret and Stanley took the child to see him. Margaret, on a warm May day, was in frail and lacy black, and her blue eyes were shaded under a wide black hat. She wore a great bunch of fragrant violets at her breast, and Stanley caught the delicious breath of them, as he led her, and the child, into the cool shadows of the old Palace.

Stanley remembered coming to the Palace, as a growing boy, when a great glass arch shut in the Court, remembered even earlier days when the clattering of horses' feet and the wheels of carriages swept in here from the street. It had always been an enchanted place, for him, a place where a boy lunched sumptuously with his mother, or his aunts, rejoicing in ice-cream and fried oysters.

He remembered college parties here, too, dances, girls in organdies and silver ribbons. He had sometimes brought Shirley to dine here, in those incredibly young days when she had seemed so sweet and so pure. And since that there had been years when, with women friends, he had found himself here for week-day teas and lunches, always glad to be a part of the pleasant stir and warmth and beauty of the big hotel.

But today, catching the fragrance of Margaret's violets, and with his big hand grasping her slender, lace-clad arm, and with her blue, satisfied eyes meeting his now and then in confidence and eager question, he felt that all the vague happiness of his entire lifetime could not equal the definite sense of ecstasy, well-being, hope and delight that flooded the world for him today.

They went up in the elevator and were shown to the lawyer's rooms. John Trowbridge was an old man, silver-headed, lean, sharp-eyed. There was a younger man, evidently a secretary, in the room with him, and this man opened the door. But immediately the lawyer came forward, and Stan heard Margaret called by the name that she was to wear for so short a time.

"Mrs. Theobald!" old Trowbridge said, taking her hand. "I am glad to see you, Madam. I am relieved to see you looking so well."

"This is the little boy," Margaret said, with some emotion, presenting the child.

The lawyer turned and looked keenly at the ruddy little friendly face, and the bared, cropped yellow head, and the blue shining eyes. And Margaret looked with a sort of timid and anxious pride at the lawyer.

Stanley, studying the group, thought he had never seen anything more touching and more dramatic than the picture they made: the old lawyer with his concerned and kindly face, the splendid child, his blue eyes so confidently upraised, and the slender, eager woman in her black, with violets at her breast, and an expression of such tender, anxious interest upon her thin brown face.

About them, for a setting, was the big room, lighted by the softly moving shadow and shine that crept in from the hot out-of-doors. The shades were drawn, and the tempered golden light, touching Margaret's warm coloring and cloudy dark hair, made her, Stanley thought, more beautiful than he had ever seen her.

"This is the baby?" the lawyer said.

Margaret nodded.

"Not motherless, after all," added the old man, smiling, "although it seemed for awhile that he was worse than orphaned. You know the story?" he asked Stan, half-turning.

"I am in—Mrs. Theobald's—confidence," Stanley said.

"There need be no—fight, Mr. Trowbridge?" Margaret asked.

"What about?" he asked, smiling quizzically. "There may be a fight between the other heirs of Madison Richards, nephews and grand-nephews, and the lady who calls herself the second Mrs. Theobald," he added, "but with that you will have nothing to do. Some share of the estate may not be covered by the will—there was a will made a month ago, I I don't know anything about it," said the old man, indifferently. "But of course your interest in the community property could not be affected in any way by that. And it is entirely possible that this child will inherit the bulk of the remaining property—he must inherit something, as the only direct heir, in any case."

"It is a responsibility," Margaret said, gravely.

"It is a great responsibility," old Trowbridge echoed. "But," he added, with an old-fashioned bow, "it is in safe hands. I am to see this other Mrs. Theobald at three o'clock this afternoon," he added. "And I shall satisfy her that she is at least to inherit some personal possessions, and a proportion of Mr. Theobald's estate—which was, of course, largely dissipated. If you will authorize me to handle your own claims, Mrs. Theobald," he was beginning, when Margaret interrupted quickly with a smile.

"They are entirely in your hands! This is hardly the time," she added, smiling, "to tell you what my plans are. But at least I want you to know that Mr. Crittenden and I——"

Her color had come flooding up radiantly, and her blue eyes shone like stars. Stanley felt his heart give a great plunge of joy and humility and pride as he saw the lawyer's face brighten and felt the grip of the friendly old hand.

"I am glad to hear it," Trowbridge said heartily. "She has had more than her share of suffering and responsibility, Mr. Crittenden. See to it now that she gets back some of these lost years!"

"I shall!" Stanley said, smiling with his usual wide grin, but feeling his throat thicken, nevertheless, and with the red blood burning in his browned face. And he put his arm about her shoulder and drew her to him as if he could never let her go.

So there were no more secrets between them. And whether Margaret Crittenden really was the most fortunate and beloved woman in the world, or whether she only imagined herself so, because of the dark waters through which she had sailed to happiness, concerned her only as an abstruse problem.

"My last trouble is over!" she told Stanley, on a certain glowing August afternoon, fourteen months after the talk with old Trowbridge in the St. Francis Hotel.

Stanley had just reached home—"Uplands" was always home, and had found her lying in a chaise-longue on the side porch. Over the whole silent world the peace and warmth and sweetness of harvest-time was lying like a tangible glory; the air smelled of fruit, and dry grass, the sinking sun was making a dazzle of pure gold through the leaves of the peppers and eucalyptus trees.

Jim, who had been in swimming three times in the last eight hours, was now climbing into the spreading, gnarled branches of a great oak near the house; Nora was darning, below it, and Tony was sousing the bright borders of zinnias, and the stock and hollyhocks and yellow daisies, with a stream of glittering water.

Margaret was in white, and was satisfied to lie still, but she had regained all her old color, and the face she turned for Stanley's kiss was surely the happiest in the world.

Stanley took a basket chair and drooped his fingers cautiously above the smoothly adjusted fine linens and pink woollens that lined the white basket that stood next to his wife. And from the fragrant cocoon within he felt the grip of small,

firm, mottled fingers, and stooping, he could see the portentously concerned, scowling, sleeping, saffron-colored face of Stanley Potts Crittenden, Third.

The thrill of it went all through his being, and he looked at Margaret with something pleading in his shamefaced grin. He didn't know why the hand-clasp of this totally unconscious little fellow should bring the salt tears smarting to his eyes.

But she did not laugh at him. Instead she said reverently: "Isn't he *gorgeous?* Imagine—seventeen days today, and he's gained exactly one whole pound. Now, really, Stan! He's going to be a big, raw-boned, red-faced thing like you!"

"Red-faced is right," Stanley agreed, staring at him in fascination.

"He was looking all about him today, as bright as a button," Margaret further boasted. "And I walked down to the barn, and we had a call from Mrs. Battersby, and we feel quite at home on our farm, don't we, Pottsy?" she said persuasively, to the baby.

"Margaret, for the Lord's sake, don't start calling him that!" Stan protested. "You don't like it, do you, Plug-ugly?" he questioned fraternally. "Poor little Skeezicks, he's got the deuce of a long name!"

"Between Plug-ugly, Skeezicks and Pottsy, I don't personally see much choice," Margaret stated judicially. "But that reminds me," she went on. "I said my last trouble was over! My dear, Jim has made up his precious little idiot mind to call me 'Mother'!"

"Well, cry about it, why don't you?" Stanley said.

"Well, it did sound so sweet!" she defended herself, smiling and blinking. "You know how silly he's been about it! He *would* stick to that foolish 'Margar,' and neither Nora nor I could persuade him to change it! He calls you 'Dad' simply enough, but he'd gotten one of those baby complexes on my name! But yesterday, when the baby and I got home, he was

terribly interested. I think he had had some idea that we were going to leave Trotkins—leave Stanny, I mean, at the hospital, because he kept walking about, proud and excited and even a little awed, and saying, 'Is he going to stay *here?* Like the Battersbys' baby? Is he ours, for *keeps?* Won't he ever go back?' It was awfully cunning.

"Finally, this morning, he came up here, where I had the baby, and I told him that after awhile little brother would begin to talk, and would run about, just as the Battersbys' baby has learned to do. And he said, 'Will you be his mother?' I said of course I would. He said, 'And what will he call you?' I said, 'Mother.'

"Jim went off and thought—you know his way—for a long time. And then he came back and said, 'You were *my* mother first, and if *I* don't call you "Mother," I don't think *he* ought to!' I said, 'You can begin to call me "Mother" just as soon as you like!' And instantly he put his hot little dusty arm up about my neck, and said, 'Mother'! And, my dear, to hear how smoothly he gets it off now, you wouldn't believe that he'd ever thought of giving me any other name!"

"So that hideous trouble is over?" Stanley said. "And we can raise our heads and try to live the memory of it down?"

She did not answer in words. But she smiled at him, and stretched toward him her lean, exquisite brown hand. And for a long time they sat without speaking, while all about them the golden day deepened toward the sunset, and while the clean slishing sound of the water, and the lazy, distant bellowing of the cows, and the zinging noise of bees, shooting like bullets over the invisible roadways of the scented garden air, came dreamily to their ears.

Jim, from the higher branches of the oak, gave an occassional triumphant shout; Hang, in the distant kitchen, chattered half-audibly to Chung, a screen door slammed, and there was stillness. From the dark velvet wallflowers came waves of rich, warm scent. And in the pink and white depths

of the cradle the baby snuffled and fussed, half opened eyes filmed with sleep, and slept again.

"It's all so beautiful, Stan," Margaret mused, after awhile.

He looked at her, with his half-serious grin. And the thought of what he had been a few years ago, and what her inspiration and her love had made him, came over him suddenly, and made him feel somehow proud and yet humble, ashamed and yet exultant.

"It's all—*you*," he said.

THE END

Microfilm Clear
SE
1.CO